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YEOMAN FLEETWOOD

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YEOMAN FLEETWOOD

BY

M. E. FRANCIS

(MRS. FRANCIS BLUNDELL)

AUTHOR OF "IN A NORTH COUNTRY VILLAGE," "THE STORY OF DAN,"
"A DAUGHTER OF THE SOIL," "MAIME O' THE CORNER,"
"FRIEZE AND FUSTIAN," "MISS ERIN,"
"THE DUENNA OF A GENIUS,"
ETC.



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To the Memory

OF

THE HON. MRS. CARRINGTON SMYTHE

("AUNT LAURA").

I HAD meant to dedicate my book to this dear kinswoman—I love to think of her as such, though no ties of blood bound us to each other, for if it be true that the friends of our friends become our friends, may it not be said, even more emphatically, that those near and dear to the nearest and dearest of all are bound to us by a bond hardly less strong than that forged by nature itself?

But besides the link of relationship, besides even my veneration for this most sweet and gracious embodiment of serene old age, my love for the close friend, my admiration of the charming woman, I had another reason for my wish to offer her this tribute. She was, as it were, connected with the book, or rather with one of the personages who plays a part therein; her father, Lord Stourton, being the intimate friend and adviser of Mrs. Fitzherbert, the recipient of her confidences, and one of the three

trustees of the celebrated papers which still remain at Messrs. Coutts' Bank. It is from Mrs. Fitzherbert's narrative to Lord Stourton, set down by his hand, and bequeathed by him to his brother (who subsequently published it), that I am indebted for many details concerning that unfortunate lady's career.

And now, though the dear Aunt has passed away before I could offer her my work, I still wish to send it into the world bearing the impress of her name, and enshrining as it were her memory.

M. B.

CONTENTS.

PART I.

PAGE

THE BENDING OF THE TWIG 1

PART II.

THE TREE 61

IN a
hero
deve
the
Char
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four,
on h
coat,
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His
head
cheer
white
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YEOMAN FLEETWOOD.

PART I.

THE BENDING OF THE TWIG.

CHAPTER I.

Heaven lies about us in our infancy,
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing boy.

—WORDSWORTH.

IN all little Simon Fleetwood's world there was no such hero as his father. His organ of veneration was largely developed, and he had a profound respect for many of the people with whom he came in contact. Squire Charnock, for instance, was, no doubt, a very remarkable personage; when he drove past in his chaise and four, or when he went a-hunting, sitting up so straight on his powerful horse, and looking so well in his red coat, Simon thought Squire Charnock a very fine man indeed, but not nearly so fine a man as his father. His father, to begin with, out-topped the Squire by a head, and had such broad shoulders, and such a loud, cheery voice, and such strong arms, and such beautiful white hair—not like the Squire's hair, which was sometimes white and sometimes brown, and on Sunday mornings had a patchy, streaky appearance, as though besprinkled with salt, for Mr. Charnock loved to lie abed when it was not a hunting day, and his church-

going toilet was hastily and perfunctorily made in consequence. Mr. Fleetwood had also long, well-shaped legs, on one of which it was Simon's privilege to ride; on these occasions the boy was hoisted up and down to his own infinite delight, and with apparently no effort on the part of his progenitor. Simon firmly believed there was nothing that his father could not do.

His respect and love for his mother was of a totally different order. He looked upon her with a certain awe, as on something infinitely precious. Every one in the house had impressed upon him that she was a real lady—"quite, quite the lady," the housemaid said. Even Aunt Binney, though occasionally unsympathetic when Simon expressed his admiration for the person in question, had several times informed him that his mother, in point of family, was as good, in fact a deal better, than Mrs. Charnock. Mrs. Fleetwood was a pretty, delicate-looking woman, with an expression of habitual discontent, and a mental condition perpetually melancholy. She had never quite forgiven the honest yeoman, her husband, for marrying her, and she could not forget the fact that he was nearly thirty years older than herself. Both of these circumstances were constantly borne in mind by Mr. Fleetwood himself, and his manner towards his wife was, in consequence, slightly tinged with remorse. The consideration of her absolutely penniless condition when, in his hale middle-age, he had fallen a victim to her charms, did not seem in any way to mitigate his offence. His prevailing attitude towards her was one of atonement, particularly since the original cause of displeasure had been aggravated by Simon's birth. Mrs. Fleetwood had several times intimated to her husband that the only alleviation she could hope for in her hard lot would be the possession of a little girl, who should resemble her own people, and whom she could bring up

entirely in her own way; and lo! she found herself the mother of a fine, sturdy boy, who was exactly like his father and his father's folk. A boy with frank blue eyes, and massive limbs, and broad shoulders—a boy that any ordinary mother might have been proud of, but who, as Mrs. Fleetwood fretfully declared, would never be anything but a yeoman.

She found some consolation in dressing him in velvet tunics and in curling his abundant brown hair; while he was in petticoats, at least, she would try to think he was her child, she said; and, later on, come what might, he should at least have the education of a gentleman; he should go to a public school and afterwards to college. He must have the advantages her son was entitled to expect; there was no reason why he should not. There had been Westons at Eton from time immemorial; her name would be a sufficient passport there, and his father could afford well enough to send him. Mr. Fleetwood acquiesced; he could certainly afford it. In point of wealth he had the advantage of his neighbour the Squire, though he never dreamed of considering himself his equal. He touched his hat to him in the hunting-field and called him "Sir," though the horse which he himself bestrode was superior in quality to Mr. Charnock's, and their subscriptions to the hunt were equal. The big, roomy house, where the Fleetwoods had lived for hundreds of years, had always been known as "The Farm"; here generations of these sturdy yeomen-folk had lived and died. They had always been a power in the neigbourhood; always men of substance, not to say wealth; respected alike by rich and poor; charitable, kindly, honest and proud. People called them "real old stock" in the days of which I write —their like is not to be found now. There was, perhaps, no one who had such a high opinion of the Fleetwood family as Miss Belinda Fleetwood, Simon's Aunt Binney,

who had kept house for his father before his marriage, and, indeed, continued to do so after that event. She took pains to impress early on the mind of the young Simon how fine and honourable a thing it was to be one of the race, and Simon found it a little difficult to reconcile this frequently expressed opinion of hers with the equally well-known views of his mother on the same subject. In Simon's own estimation Aunt Binney ranked much lower than either of his parents; she made excellent tarts, not to speak of elder wine and raspberry vinegar, and when in a good humour she related anecdotes about his father's boyhood which made her a delightful companion; but she had a way of looking at his mother, and sniffing when the latter made a remark, which Simon violently resented; and when he grew older he discovered that Aunt Binney actually thought her brother had been foolish in making such a marriage. On the whole, he respected old Susan, the cook, infinitely more, while there was no comparison between the dutiful regard which he bestowed on Miss Fleetwood, and the warm esteem awarded to Bill, the head man at the farm, who had gone bird's-nesting with Mr. Fleetwood in days of yore, and was his right hand now. Simon, indeed, esteemed every one about the place with one exception: he had no opinion whatever of Jane. Jane was the "lass" who did odd jobs about the house, and attended to Simon's personal toilet. It was she who dressed his hair in ringlets under Mrs. Fleetwood's supervision, who fastened his starched frill so very tightly about his round little pillar of a throat, who scolded him when he drew patterns with his chubby forefinger on his velvet tunic, and who sewed up his pockets at the top so that he could not put anything inside. Moreover, she related "boggart" tales which made him feel very uncomfortable when she took away the candle, though he scorned to

admit that he was afraid. Besides on one occasion he had heard her tell an untruth, from which moment he had looked on her with a certain horror, considering her foredoomed to perdition. It really weighed upon him to think that Jane could have been guilty of so wicked and so disgraceful an act. He was quite relieved when, a few weeks after this lapse from the path of righteousness, she evinced tokens of repentance.

He was walking home from church one hot Sunday, his broad, dimpled hand firmly clasped in Jane's—to his intense discomfort, for he loathed that hard, hot, heavy hand of hers—endeavouring to beguile the tedium of the way by listening to her conversation to a friend. Jane was speaking in a particularly dolorous tone, and every now and then the hot fingers aforesaid gave a convulsive twitch.

"It's all my own fault, it is that," said Jane. "If I hadn't have been so 'ard like he'd never have thought on sich a thing."

"Well, I allus did say, thou knows, as 'twas downright cruel to sarve him that gate," returned the friend, "and theer it is, thou sees, theer it is. He's gone an' 'listed six months to the very day arter thee an' him fell out."

"Ah," resumed Jane lugubriously, "it shows plain, dunnot it, why he did it? I blame myself—that I do."

"Well, what's ended cannot be mended," said the other. "Theer's no use cryin' ower spilt milk. I wouldn't give way if I were thee—I wouldn't indeed."

Jane, suddenly releasing Simon, plunged her hand into her large pocket, which was tied by a ribbon round her waist, and drawing out her prayer-book produced a handkerchief, which had been lying, neatly folded, beneath the cover. With this she wiped her eyes, and then, having restored it to its original folds, replaced it

with the prayer-book in her pocket, Simon staring at her the while with large, solemn blue eyes; then she clutched his hand again, and said in a different tone:—

"Lord, I must be gettin' awhoam; Missus'll be lookin' out for me."

The friends parted, and Jane hurried along, sighing every now and then in a manner which impressed Simon very much. He forgot all about his personal grievances, and peered up at her compassionately from under his broad-brimmed hat.

"Jane," he said at length, "what makes you so sorry?"

"Ah, Master Simon," returned Jane, with a sigh that seemed to come from the depths of her heart, "I'm feelin' remorseful—that's what I am."

"What's remorseful?" inquired Simon.

"Why, didn't yo' hear i' th' sermon to-day as we mun all be remorseful—sorry for aught as we've done wrong?"

Simon eyed her queerly.

"Are you feeling sorry, Jane, for your sins, like the sermon said?"

"I'm feelin' mighty sorry jest now, Master Simon," said Jane with another sigh.

"For everything, Jane?"

Jane laughed. "Thou'rt a funny little lad, for sure. Of course I'm sorry for everythin'."

Simon wondered within himself whether Jane remembered having denied that she broke the sugar-bowl, and whether she was properly sorry for that. The problem occupied his mind during the rest of the homeward walk, and even overshadowed the roast beef and cherry tart of which he usually partook so gleefully on Sunday. After dinner he sat on his little stool at his father's feet cogitating still. His mother was lying down upstairs. Aunt Binney, with a book of Pious Reflections open on her

knee, was installed in the window-seat a white handkerchief spread over her best cap, and was beginning to nod with a sanctified expression in no wise justified by the extent of her meditations. Mr. Fleetwood had removed his coat, and was sitting sound asleep in his straight-backed oak chair; his massive, prematurely white head had fallen forward and his chin rested on the ruffles of his shirt. Simon crossed his short legs and folded his hands in as near an imitation of his father's attitude as he could assume, and wondered within himself whether Jane remembered about the sugar-bowl. If she really was remorseful it would be a pity if she forgot to repent of that. Jane was not often in such a softened and pious mood—she might never be remorseful again. Simon was really much concerned and, after a time, rising very gently, he crept out of the room and thought he would go and remind her. She was in the pantry helping to wash up and catching sight of the small velvet-clad figure, desired him sharply to go back to the parlour that minute and not come messin' about in his best clothes. Simon retired unsatisfied: it was clearly an unpropitious moment, and he had dark suspicions that Jane's remorse was already wearing off; yet the opportunity must not be allowed to slip. After some reflection he decided to write Jane a letter, which would recall her chief iniquity forcibly to her mind; so he pattered up the slippery oak stairs, full of importance, ran quickly to his own special drawer, and possessed himself of a pencil. It was more difficult to find paper: if the task on which he was bent had not been of so high an order, he would have torn a leaf out of his copy-book, but he felt it would be undignified in one about to act as mentor to commit a peccadillo on his own account. After mature consideration he removed the cover from a pot of jam which Aunt Binney had presented to him the day before. Thus pro-

vided he betook himself to one of the spare bedrooms, where he knew he should be undisturbed. The shutters were closed, but bright rays of light filtered through the chinks. Simon knelt down beside the window-seat, and having placed his paper so that one of these rays fell across it, began his labour. By-and-bye the jam-pot cover was filled on both sides with irregular lines of round text: there were no stops or capitals, Simon's education not having proceeded so far. The letter ran thus: "my dear jane you sed you was thinkink of your sins so i take up my pencle to ramind you about the sugar bole you broke it and you sed it was pussy im afrade my dear jane your a lire from simon weston fleetwood." The signature was squeezed into a very jammy place, but was nevertheless legible.

When he had folded the missive, and absently wiped his sticky fingers on the skirt of his tunic, it occurred to him that as Jane could not read he would be obliged to impart its contents to her himself. He quaked a little at the notion, for Jane's hand was not only hard and heavy, but exceedingly ready—yet he did not flinch from his purpose. His opportunity came at bed-time, when Jane wrathfully took him to task for the condition of his tunic.

"I was writing a letter, Jane," he explained with dignity; "I was writing a letter to you, and I was obliged to take the cover of the jam-pot because I hadn't anything else to write on."

"Well, to be sure," ejaculated Jane, "whatever was thou writing to me for?"

Simon wriggled himself free from her hands, and running over to his little cot produced the letter from underneath his bolster.

"Here it is, Jane," he said solemnly. "Shall I read it to you?"

"Yigh—thou can if thou's a mind, soon as I gets to thy 'air," returned Jane, curious and amused.

One by one Simon's small undergarments were removed, and he stood at length divested of all save his little shirt.

"Now, Jane, can I begin?"

He was facing her, his head thrown back, his legs planted firmly on the rug—such a straight, well-made little fellow, his naked limbs so brown where they were exposed to sun and wind, so white where the protecting skirts had covered them!

Jane signified her assent.

"But I'll be brushin' thy 'air while I'm waiting," she said, twisting him dexterously round.

This did not quite fall in with Simon's views, but he made no protest; his heart was beating rather quickly, and he would have liked to be in a position to judge of the effect produced by his homily. He gave one glance round to assure himself that Jane was really attending, and then began, read slowly, and very distinctly, and running his forefinger under each wavering line. There was an expectant pause when he concluded.

"Is that all, Master Simon?" inquired Jane in an ominous voice. She had brushed very energetically for the last moment or two, but in his excitement he had not noticed the fact.

"Yes, Jane," returned Simon, with modest triumph. He tried to screw round his head again but she held him fast by the curls.

"Well then," cried Jane, "all I can say is thou'rt a nasty, cross-tempered, interferin' little lad. Who told thee to meddle in other folks affairs? Pokin' thy ugly little nose wheer it wasn't wanted, and spyin' and pryin' that gate. Hold thy head still I tell thee," emphasising

the command with a sharp rap with the back of the brush.

Simon was amazed and bitterly disappointed. He did not mind the back of the brush but he was pierced to the heart by Jane's ingratitude.

"I thought you liked thinking about your sins," he explained; but Jane cut him short with a peremptory command to hold his din—she'd had enough of that long tongue of his for once—did he never hear about Tell-Tale-Tit, whose tongue should be slit?—and sarve him reet, too! Castin' up about an owd bowl as wasna worth tuppence.

Simon keenly felt the injustice of her treatment, but he endured it in silence; he even submitted without a struggle to the twisting up of his hair in curl papers—a ceremony on which Jane insisted even though it was Sunday night—though he felt in his sore heart that no greater depth of degradation could be reached, unless, indeed, it were the final ignominy of having his top-knot kept in place by one of Jane's hair-pins.

He went to bed much puzzled—conscious, in fact, of a general upheaval of his preconceived notions of equity. He had been scolded and slapped and curled as though he were naughty; yet he had a vague suspicion that if any one were naughty it really was Jane.

Those curls of his were the bane of his life, and he was only delivered from them on his sixth birthday, which was eventful in more ways than one. To begin with his father presented him with his first pony—and surely life contains no keener joy than the contemplation of such a possession. Simon's heart was so full, indeed, that he could hardly speak as he walked round and round the little shaggy creature which looked so ridiculously tiny in one of the great stalls. His eyes grew larger and larger, and his smile broader and broader, when his

father led him next to the harness room and showed him the little bridle, and the saddle that was a miniature of his own—none of your pad affairs, but a real, real saddle, with stirrups and all complete.

"Eh!" ejaculated little Simon, as he surveyed this last treasure, "eh, my word, my word!"

Further speech was impossible to him, but his radiant face spoke for him plainly enough.

"And that's not all," said the big genial father, "there's something here that'll make a man of thee out-and-out. See—it's a secret; I haven't told Mother yet. Thou'rt six years old. It's time for thee to be a man."

And then and there, to the almost awe-struck delight of Simon, the grim satisfaction of old Bill, and the openly-expressed admiration of Joe, the stableman, Mr. Fleetwood produced from one of his saddle-bags a brown paper parcel, which on being unfastened proved to contain a bran new little suit of clothes—jacket and trousers of green cloth, rich in highly polished brass buttons. With big awkward fingers he helped Simon to divest himself of the despised petticoats, and assisted him to assume the longed-for masculine gear. Though Simon never felt any diffidence in availing himself of Jane's aid, he would, at any other time, have blushed to perform his toilet in the presence of so many male witnesses, but now he was too full of pride and rapture to think of such matters, and the transformation was effected amid much jubilation.

"There!" cried Mr. Fleetwood triumphantly, when the last button and button-hole met, "there, my lad, now thou *art* a lad!"

Bill extended a long gnarled forefinger. "They curls, mester," he suggested. "I'd 'ave they curls off. They gi' him naught but a wench's face."

"Come then," cried the master with a jolly laugh,

"we'll have the curls off too. Now then, who's got a pair of scissors?"

In the excitement of the moment none were to be found, and Mr. Fleetwood was just going to operate on his son's head with the stable clippers, when Joe, who had darted out to the yard, opportunely returned with the shears that were used for the sheep. The top-knot went first, Simon's father uttering an exclamation of surprise and disgust on discovering the hair-pin with which, in honour of the auspicious occasion, Jane had insisted on securing it.

"Time for thee to have done with these things," cried Mr. Fleetwood contemptuously, and Simon blushed to the temples, and felt that the revelation might justly cause Bill and Joe to despise him to his dying day. But, on account of his birthday, doubtless, they magnanimously refrained from comment. When the last shining lock had been severed, and Simon stood in all the glory of a cropped and jagged head, they proposed to give him "three times three".

The yeoman started them with a hearty "Hip! hip! hip!" and old Bill joined in with a will, and Joe, who had exceedingly vigorous lungs, exerted them to the utmost. The very rafters rang, and Simon was so exhilarated by the sound that he cheered lustily for himself, and began a kind of war-dance of triumph, trampling on the discarded tunic, and waving in each hand a bunch of the abhorred curls.

The din was at its height when the door of the harness room was pushed hastily open, and Mrs. Fleetwood appeared.

She shrieked with horror, and tottered back against the wall.

Bill feigned to be suddenly occupied in the perfectly needless rubbing up of Simon's new stirrups, and Joe,

with an abrupt cessation of his vocal efforts, and a shamefaced pull at his forelock, shambled awkwardly past her.

Mr. Fleetwood himself looked a little foolish, but Simon gleefully danced on, never doubting that the joy and admiration of his mother would equal that of everybody else.

After a moment she recovered herself sufficiently to inquire, with flashing eyes, the meaning of all that was going on.

"Why, you can see for yourself, my dear," returned her husband, speaking good-humouredly, though with a heightened colour; "I have bought the lad a new suit for a birthday present. He's far too big for petticoats. I meant to surprise you at dinner-time, but since you've come out it's right enough. You must own he's a picture," he added with fatherly pride.

Mrs. Fleetwood made a dart at the little capering figure and brought it to a standstill. As she surveyed Simon she turned quite pale.

"He looks—he looks odious," she cried falteringly. "Oh! Mr. Fleetwood, how could you? You've ruined him! He looks like a convict almost. His hair will take months to grow again; and I hate him in that suit. I think you might have consulted me. It's very, very hard that I should be interfered with like this, when—when I have so much to bear already."

Simon gazed up at her in amazement, still tightly clutching handfuls of his own hair. He could not conceive the reason of his mother's annoyance, until it occurred to him that it might possibly be because she had not assisted at his installation in these adorable new garments.

"You know, Mother," he whispered, "you'll be able to put them on every other day if you like. They've got such a lot of buttons an' no strings. They're much easier to fasten than my old clothes."

She gave him a little push from her. "Indeed I don't want to have anything to do with the nasty, common things," she cried. "You and your men can take him into your charge now, Mr. Fleetwood, since you've begun so well. The child doesn't belong to me any more. You have made him a perfect fright!"

"Very well, my love," returned her husband gravely, "no doubt Simon is getting too big to be so much with the women-folk. I am sorry to have offended you," he went on in a softer tone, "it was a mistake. I thought you would be as pleased with the little fellow's joy as I am."

"Pleased!" ejaculated Mrs. Fleetwood with a sob, "how can you go on so? Can't you see for yourself that he looks like a boor? I feel disgraced that he should belong to me."

She pushed little Simon from her and, bursting into tears, rushed away.

The child felt for a moment as though all the world had turned topsy-turvy. Catching the infection of a grief which he could not understand, and overcome, moreover, by an acute sense of dismay and disappointment, he, too, fell a-sobbing, and, running to his father, hid his face in the flap of his coat. Mr. Fleetwood lifted him up and wiped his eyes with his great bandana handkerchief; his own face was grave and somewhat stern.

"No crying," he said quickly. "Come, give over then, there's a good lad. Thou must be a man now, thou knows."

Simon would have thought his father angry with him but that he used the homely "Thou," which with him betokened tenderness or emotion; but he felt, nevertheless, wounded and astonished at the reproof—had not his mother herself wept but a moment ago? As he

looked up with startled, brimming blue eyes, Bill, from his corner, still polishing the little stirrup, put his thoughts into words.

"We'n had tears enough jest now," he observed, with a world of indignant feeling in his tone. "Tears enough for one while. Theer's no satisfying some folks."

He adored his master and former playmate, and though, like all the inhabitants of the Farm, he had the highest respect for Mrs. Fleetwood's "quality," he resented the slighting tone she often thought fit to adopt to vards her husband and child.

Mr. Fleetwood set Simon on his legs again and pushed back the unevenly trimmed locks from his brow.

"No more crying, mind," he said gently, but holding up a warning forefinger. Then he looked across at Bill, and addressed him in the dialect which since their boyhoods they had always spoken together.

"A woman's tears, Bill," he said, "are nobbut what one looks for. 'Tis their natur' to cry. Thou knows nought about women-folk, Bill, or else thou'd know that. 'Tis different wi' lads. *Lads* munnot be soft; *lads* munnot cry—when they'n been breeched an' all."

Here Simon straightened himself and sniffed and blinked very hard.

"A body 'ud think as folks might content theirsels," grumbled Bill, "seein' as they'n all as their 'earts could wish for—never crossed in nought, and wed to the gradliest mon i' th' country-side."

"Bill," cried his master, "thou knows nought about it—nor I neither, if it comes to that. I've made a mess o' this job—I should ha' set about it different. I've summat yon i' th' saddle-bag for the missus, too—I should ha' shown her that first."

Bill made some inarticulate murmur of disapproval, and the other went on:—

"If hoo isn't satisfied it's nought but what was to be expected—hoo's been used to different ways an' different folks. And if it cooms to that, Bill, thou mun mind as the first woman couldn't content hersel i' th' Garden of Eden."

He gave a little laugh, and going over to his saddle-bag took from it a flat parcel.

"Now," he cried in an altered tone, "I'm goin' in to the missus wi' this. Coom, Bill, thou can saddle yon little pony—we's see how the young 'un likes him. Set him on's back an' bring him round to the front door."

He strode away, and Bill, with immense, almost unnecessary, cheerfulness and alacrity, set about investing the new purchase with saddle and bridle. Simon assisted full of delighted importance. Was there ever such rubbing down and polishing of fat little sides, such combing and brushing of a shaggy mane, such oiling of miniature hoofs? But at last the little steed was fully accoutred, the stirrups shortened, the girths tightened after much exertion on the part of Bill—so much, indeed, that it almost entailed the bodily lifting of the pony off the cobble-stones. At last Simon was in the saddle, his toes sticking straight out, his hands clutching the bridle, all his former troubles forgotten, and rapture unspeakable filling his heart. His father and mother were standing in the doorway on the look-out for him. Mrs. Fleetwood's cheeks were still a little flushed, and her eyes retained the brightness born of tears. But she smiled and nodded at Simon quite gaily, and he observed that she held in her hand the packet before alluded to, from the open sides of which now protruded certain folds of fine white muslin.

Aunt Binney's tall, angular form was perceptible in the background, and her high-pitched voice was presently heard in loud tones of approval.

"Of all the pictur's! If he isn't the spit an' image of's father. The very moral of him he is; only your hair used to be sandy, Simon."

"Aye, the lad takes after his mother in that," said Mr. Fleetwood. "His hair's a bonny colour."

"I am glad I did not know you when your hair was sandy, Mr. Fleetwood," said his wife. Standing on tip-toe, she pushed the abundant grey locks back from his broad forehead. "It must look much nicer now," she said, surveying him with a critical air.

The yeoman smiled with an expression that was at once amused and tender and a little sad.

"You see after all, my love, age has some advantage."

He imprisoned the little hand that was still meditatively stroking his brow, and kissed it with old-fashioned gallantry.

Simon did not at the time take in the meaning of the little scene. But he went to bed that night more than ever convinced that his father was the kindest and most perfect of men. All men ought to be very good, and all boys ought to try to be, because some day they would also be men. It was a comfort to know that women were different, and that what had startled and grieved him in the behaviour of his beautiful mother was only quite natural, because there were two kinds of right and wrong, and what would be very reprehensible in man or boy was no harm at all in woman.

CHAPTER II.

We sleep and wake and sleep, but all things move;
The Sun flies forward to his brother Sun;
The dark Earth follows wheel'd in her ellipse;
And human things, returning on themselves,
Move onward, leading up the golden year.

—TENNYSON.

THE years came and went, and in the quiet precincts of the Farm there seemed to be few changes. Simon's mother grew more and more delicate, and the gentle tolerance with which her husband had always regarded her foibles had recently given place to a more active and demonstrative tenderness. He carried her up and down-stairs, and purchased for her special use a low four-wheeled chaise with very easy springs. Aunt Binney was scandalised at the introduction of such a vehicle. If her sister-in-law Fleetwood was too fine to ride a pillion behind her husband, surely she might content herself with a gig. But she did not venture to grumble in her brother's presence, nor even in Simon's. The lad was growing like his father in more ways than one, and vied with him in chivalrous devotion to the pretty, fretful creature who had honoured him by giving him birth.

For the rest the world jogged on much as it had always done. Squire Charnock lost his wife shortly after Simon was "breeched," and speculation was rife as to whom he would choose to replace her. It was universally declared, even before the poor lady had been carried to her long home, that he must of necessity marry again. He was childless, and had, more-

over, quarrelled with his brother, the heir presumptive —if it was but to spite him, the villagers agreed with much wagging of heads and pursing up of lips, he'd be bound to look out for a new missus, and when one came to think of him so lonely like, and such a fine man still, and so fond of company, why what else could he do?

But the Squire's second marriage took every one by surprise, after all, for what must he do but pick up some foreign madam, "a Frenchy or some such mak' o' body," and bring her home from some outlandish place where he had gone travelling, after his late wife was laid under the sod. Nobody had ever appreciated the merits of the last-named lady so much before. They had thought but poorly of her in her lifetime, and had found it difficult to forgive her remissness in failing to provide Mr. Charnock with an heir; but now by mutual accord she was canonised. The inhabitants of Charnleigh village felt their Squire's choice to be a slur upon their native land. What was the use, as the proprietor of the Charnock Arms inquired, what was the use of the country's having sent out all them ships and men to make an end of France if their own Squire was to go and bring a French madam into the midst of them? In the chorus of disapproval which greeted the announcement of the match one voice was missing: Mr. Fleetwood stoutly maintained that the Squire was right to marry the woman he fancied. He maintained it so loudly and perseveringly, and with such emphatic raps on the table, that by-and-bye the matter was no long[illegible] discussed in his presence. Behind his back people nodded and winked at each other, and whispered that he'd be like to stand up for the Squire's choice seeing that he had not made a very wise one himself.

The Charnleigh folk forgot their dissatisfaction, how-

ever, when they heard that there were to be "such doin's as never was" in honour of the new-comer. The Squire wished her to receive a hearty English welcome, it was understood, and when rumours of tenants' dinners, and a dance in the barn, and other festivities of an equally hospitable description flew about, all were magnanimously prepared to do honour to the bride.

"After all, poor soul," old Betty Barnes remarked when she received the bedgown and petticoat presented in honour of the occasion to each widow in the village, "after all, poor soul," 't warn't none o' her fault that she was born a Frenchy, no more nor 't would ha' been if she'd ha' been born wi'out no legs nor that."

The sentiment was felt to be just, and was repeated many times as the day appointed for the home-coming of bride and bridegroom drew near.

Mrs. Fleetwood expressed a wish to see the arrival, and her husband drove her in the chaise to the lodge gates of Charnleigh Hall, where they took up their position in close proximity to the triumphal arch. Simon rode alongside of the chaise on his pony. Mr. Fleetwood could not properly mix with Mr. Charnock's tenants, the farm being a freehold and he himself in every way independent of the Squire, while his social status did not admit of the well-appointed chaise following the more antiquated vehicles of the neighbouring gentry which passed rapidly under the archway, and took up their position in front of the Hall. Mrs. Fleetwood was disposed to complain a little of this enforced isolation, to which, however, as she added with a sigh, she was but too well accustomed.

"We are neither fish, flesh, nor fowl," she murmured. "The people with whom I should by right associate have cast me off; while as for your friends ——"

"My friends are not good enough for you, are they,

my dear?" put in the yeoman finishing the sentence. "Never mind: I think we can very well as we are. We shall have a splendid view here. Good-day, Mr. Billington," as the bailiff rode up, full of excitement.

"Good-day to you, Mr. Fleetwood. I've come to ask a favour o' ye. Will ye let yon fine lad o' yours present the address? Ye see, 'tis this way: My little wench there will hand up a nosegay, while the school childer's singin' their welcome, an' hoo's a bit timid like, an' hoo dunnot like the notion o' goin' up by hersel'. Hoo isn't one o' the school childer, ye know, an' I don't reckon to let ony o' them go up along of her. I reckon to read the address mysel' a bit later on, but I jest bethought me as your lad 'ud be the very chap to go up with it. Eh! 't 'ull be a pratty seet—the lad an' the lass goin' up, one a side o' t'other, an' him such a gradely little chap."

"To be sure, to be sure," cried the father, much flattered. "Simon'll be proud to go, won't you, Simon? You must hold up your head, you know, and look the lady in the face."

"Yigh, he'll larn to do that quick enough, I'll engage, afore aught's long," laughed the bailiff. "I am very thankful to ye, Mr. Fleetwood. Coom wi' me, my lad, an' I'll show you where to stand."

Simon jumped down from his pony and handed the reins to his father, who was subjected to a somewhat severe reprimand from Mrs. Fleetwood for having made so little of the boy.

"I don't see why my son should be chosen as a match for the bailiff's child—he might be any common lad."

"My dear, he has been chosen because he is my son," returned her husband, with the quiet firmness which he so rarely adopted, and which invariably caused Mrs.

Fleetwood to subside. "I am proud and glad to show this mark of respect to the Squire."

Simon at first eyed his little companion askance, not because she was the bailiff's daughter, but because she happened to be a girl. When at last, however, the Squire's chariot drew up in the midst of the enthusiastic throng, he held out his hand to her kindly enough, for he saw that she was frightened and bewildered.

"Come along," he said, "we've got to go right up to 'em. You're to give your flowers to the lady, while I give this paper to the Squire."

All was bustle and cheerful confusion as they approached the vehicle. People were unyoking the horses, and the Squire was leaning forward shaking hands right and left. A fine, fresh-complexioned, portly man was he, and right kindly did he smile at Simon who, with head thrown back and form erect, presented his address fearlessly.

"Why, whose lad is this?" cried the Squire. "What a fine lad to be sure. What is your name my man?"

"Simon Weston Fleetwood," replied the boy. "My father and mother are over yonder. We have all come to wish you welcome."

"By George, a splendid boy! Look here Sweetheart," and the Squire turned affectionately to the lady at his side, "here is a fine specimen of a little Englishman for you."

"The children are indeed beautiful," murmured a soft voice from the interior of the chariot, and the Squire's bride leaned forward in her turn, and extended a gracious hand to receive the little maiden's flowers. What a lovely face! Simon had never seen the like. It was dark and yet bright, with such great soft curious eyes. The boy grew suddenly shy, and dropped his own.

"Aye, aye," cried Mr. Charnock, "the little girl's well enough—the bailiff's child—I know her well—a bonny little lass. But look at the lad, madam, look at the lad. See here, my boy, tell Father and Mother that I would like to see them at the Hall yonder to thank them for their kindness in coming to welcome me, and mind you come up, too, for your share of the good things that are going."

The triumphal procession moved onwards, and Simon, returning to his parents, repeated the Squire's message. Great, indeed, was Mrs. Fleetwood's satisfaction, and very bright and pretty did she look when Mr. Charnock —all smiles and graciousness to-day—presented her to his bride in just the same terms as those he had employed in introducing neighbours of his own standing.

"Upon my soul, Fleetwood," he cried a little later, clapping the honest yeoman on the shoulder, "I was glad to see that boy of yours to-day. By George, sir, I took it to be a good omen that such a promising lad should be waiting for us on our threshold. I tell you, Fleetwood, I would give twenty years of my life to call such a lad my son."

"Well, sir," returned the other simply, "I hope and pray the Lord may send you just such another."

But the wish was not destined to be realised. The only fruit of the Squire's union with the foreign lady was one fragile little girl. People said that the marriage had not been blessed, and reminded each other of their prophesies before the event had taken place. The Squire, at all times accustomed to live beyond his means, seemed in his bitter disappointment to become reckless. The Hall was perpetually full of company, and wild tales flew about the country of the extravagant doings of him and his friends, and people blamed the stupidity of the French Madam, who had not given

her master something better to think on. Simon heard little of this talk, for he had been sent to school soon after the Squire's marriage, and though he had shared the general disappointment at the non-arrival of a son at the Hall, chiefly because his father thought it a pity, he soon ceased to trouble his head about the matter. His own life had now become more varied. After a year or two at a private academy he was sent to Eton, his mother's influence proving sufficiently strong to obtain admittance for him; and existence was changed indeed for the country-bred boy. He was intelligent and industrious, and liked his work well enough, but was conscious from the first of a subtle difference between himself and his companions. He had always held his own, however, his strength of character as well as his magnificent physique ensuring him respect; and after a time his proficiency at all manly games caused him to become something of a favourite.

When he was about fifteen certain events took place, which, though apparently trivial, not only altered his actual circumstances, but influenced his whole subsequent life.

Mr. Charnock, tired of being at enmity with his only brother, invited him and his family to spend Christmas at the Hall; and Mr. John Charnock, with his wife and his son Humphrey, whom Simon recognised as a fellow-Etonian, arrived by the same coach which brought that young gentleman home for the holidays.

Young Humphrey greeted him with surprise and the respectful pleasure due to two years' seniority and magnificently muscular arms.

"Hullo, Fleetwood! I didn't know you came from this part of the world."

"I live quite close to Charnleigh Hall," said Simon.

"Why, that is famous. We'll have some rare practisings at football."

In his uncle's carriage Humphrey enlarged upon his satisfaction. He had feared the holidays would be rather dull ones, there being no young folks at the Hall with the exception of the five-year old girl-cousin.

"Fleetwood, let me see—Fleetwood—why, that must be Simon Fleetwood's boy. And you say he is at Eton. Why, how did he get there? I should have thought old Simon would have had better sense!" exclaimed his father.

"Do you know him then, sir?"

"Know him? Well, yes, in a kind of a way. He is a yeoman-farmer, and his land adjoins the Charnleigh property. It appears old Simon intends his son to make a figure in the world. Foolish fellow, foolish fellow, he will repent bringing up the lad so much above his station."

"No wonder young Fleetwood's got muscular arms," thought Humphrey contemptuously, but nevertheless he resolved to be civil and condescending if he met Simon, for, after all, it would be confounded dull work if he could find no one with whom to play football.

But he was agreeably surprised to discover two or three youths of his own age at the Hall, and the time passed gaily and pleasantly. He went out shooting for the first time, and besides the football, the weather was gloriously seasonable, and he could slide and skate to his heart's content.

One bright, intensely cold afternoon, Simon came upon a merry party skating on a pond which lay in the outskirts of the Charnleigh woods, and partly in one of his father's fields.

He had gone down there thinking to find the place deserted, and was pleased and astonished on discovering that the fine piece of ice had already been taken possession of.

"Hallo, Charnock! I'm coming in a minute," he called out, proceeding with cheerful alacrity to put on his skates.

Humphrey Charnock was not in his house at Eton, and he had hitherto concerned himself little about him, beyond a certain vague recognition of him as the Squire's nephew. But youth instinctively seeks young companionship, and though he had never cared to associate with Charnock at school, it would be both natural and pleasant to fraternise now. Humphrey, however, had risen vastly in his own estimation since his arrival at Charnleigh. As the Squire's nephew he had more or less played the part of host towards the three young visitors, and, moreover, was quite sharp enough to appreciate the importance of being heir "in tail" to that fine property. He considered the present a favourable opportunity for putting "that fellow Fleetwood" in his place.

"I say," he drawled, skating slowly towards Simon, who was rapidly and impatiently fastening the last strap of the last skate. "I say, Fleetwood, we don't want you here, you know."

Simon drew the little leather tongue firmly through before he looked up: there was a flash in his eyes, and his face was red, but he was quite calm.

"Oh, don't you," he returned, "that's a pity, because I'm coming."

Humphrey propelled himself a yard or two nearer.

"It's uncommon impertinent of you, Fleetwood. I and these other gentlemen wish to have the pond to ourselves."

Simon made no reply but leisurely descended on to the ice, skimming past Humphrey in another moment.

"Let's chase him," cried one of the others coming up, and the two remaining visitors gleefully supported the

proposal. They were Rugby boys, and were unfettered by any traditions of Simon's prowess in the cricket-field.

"Well, it is a confounded shame," remarked Humphrey. "He's trespassing, you know, and I've warned him; so he deserves a lesson."

In the presence of his three mates he felt as brave as a lion. Meanwhile, Simon was unconcernedly pursuing his course round the pond, cutting figures of eight, and performing other feats on the outside edge which would have much impressed any ordinary juvenile onlookers. But the four in question, filled with zeal for the honour of the Charnocks in particular and the maintenance of law and order in general, charged up to him with severe and portentous countenances and surrounded him. Simon stopped abruptly; then, with unexpected decision, seized the two foremost youths by their respective collars, knocked their heads together, and flung them to a convenient distance, where they remained for some moments clawing at the ice in the vain attempt to regain the perpendicular. With a sudden flank movement he next obtained possession of Humphrey, and clutching him firmly by the neck he turned to deal with his fourth opponent, a brave little fellow, who came sparring up to him with a valour worthy of a better cause. Simon burst out laughing as he imprisoned the two bony little warlike arms in one strong hand.

"You're a brave fellow," he said. "Now, look here, what do you want to fight me for?"

"Because you're trespassing," returned the boy, struggling in Simon's iron grip.

"I'm not then," cried Simon bluntly. "This pond belongs as much to my father as to Squire Charnock. I've always come here when I wanted to, and I always will. I don't want to hurt you, but you musn't interfere

with me. Now then, all you fellows, stand by and see fair. I've got to fight you, young Charnock—'tis a pity you're so small, but we can't settle the matter any other way, so I'm going to hold one hand behind me and that will make me about your match. Come on, lad, and take off your skates."

Humphrey turned his head with difficulty towards him; he was white and sick with fear—the mere weight of Simon's hand on his neck was enough for him.

"I don't want to take off my skates," he stammered. "There—there isn't time—besides I don't want to fight a fellow like you, Fleetwood."

"Well, you've got to do it," returned Simon grimly. "There's no question about a fellow like me. If I tie up one hand we're equals. If you won't fight, I'll thrash you." While he spoke he was propelling him towards the bank. The other boys gathered round, full of excitement, and loudly protesting that nothing could be fairer or more honourable than Simon's conduct.

When the bank was reached Simon released his adversary and began to unfasten his skates, but Humphrey remained motionless. After a moment's pause he moistened his dry lips and faltered:—

"There's a mistake, Fleetwood—I—thought, I didn't know you had a right to come here, or I shouldn't have interfered."

Simon looked up quickly.

"You mean that you apologise?"

"Yes, I suppose I do."

"There must be no supposing. You apologise fully and humbly?"

"Yes," hesitatingly.

"And you promise never to interfere with me again?"

"Yes."

Simon refastened his skate and returned to the pond,

while Humphrey as soon as he was out of earshot explained to his incredulous and disappointed companions that it would never have done for him to have got mixed up with a fellow like that. He couldn't have demeaned himself by fighting with him—besides there would have been no end of a row with his father and most probably his uncle. His incoherent statement was received with frigid disgust, and the eldest of the party, remarking that he had had enough of the business for one, led the way homewards whistling. The others followed in his wake, each assuming a jaunty air, and putting their hands in their pockets; but all felt that the dignity of their order had that day received a blow which it would take long in recovering. Humphrey brought up the rear; he, too, put his hands in his pockets and whistled shrilly, and a good deal out of tune.

Simon, left in possession of the pond, flew round and round, and cut wonderful figures of his own composition, and enjoyed himself amazingly. Once or twice when he paused he thought he heard a faint cry, and wondered what manner of bird or beast it might emanate from, but he was too much intoxicated by the exercise to cogitate long. When, however, in the gathering dusk, he sat down to remove his skates, he heard it again, distinct and near at hand. It came from the direction of the Charnleigh woods, and, springing to his feet, Simon ran across the pond and began to search for the cause. All at once he almost stumbled across a little white heap on the ground, and as he stooped over it, it moved and moaned.

"Why, what have we here?" he cried in astonishment.

It was a little girl of about five or six years old, with clustering dark curls, and immense dark eyes which she fixed vaguely on Simon. He raised her in his arms:

her teeth were chattering with cold, and her little limbs almost petrified.

"Where's Humphrey?" she whimpered, "where's Cousin Humphrey?"

"It must be the Squire's little girl," said Simon to himself, adding aloud: "why, how did you come here?"

"I wanted to see Cousin Humphrey skate. O—o—oh—I am so cold! I am so cold!"

"Aye, indeed, poor little maid, you're well-nigh frozen. I'll run with you to our place—it's much nearer than the Hall. You'll let me take you to the nice warm fire, won't you? See, it's quite close—we'll be there in two minutes."

The child only wailed in reply, and Simon took the law into his own hands, and stripping off his jacket, wrapped it round her. According to the custom of the time her little feet and legs were insufficiently covered by the thinnest of socks and shoes, and she was now almost incapable of moving them. Simon had a natural tenderness for all live things, and had, moreover, been taught from his earliest childhood to respect and compassionate the weakness of the other sex. The sufferings of this very small specimen of woman-kind aroused all his sympathy, and it was with acute distress that he listened to her cries.

"Are you hurt?" he asked suddenly, fearing that she might have sustained some injury that he knew not of. "Tell me, is it only the cold, or does anything pain you?"

"It's my hands," sobbed the little creature; "they do hurt, oh they do!"

She held out two minute gloveless hands, black and blue, and doubtless acutely painful with cold. Simon remembered the agony which he had himself endured, when once, as a very little fellow, he had stood about

with his father one cold market-day, and how his father had only restored the circulation to his own small suffering members by warming them in his capacious bosom.

"Poor little hands!" he said gently. "Put them in here; we'll soon warm them. Now, we'll run for it, shall we?" He cuddled her close to him, and set off at a brisk pace, feeling as though two small bits of ice were pressing against his breast. Gradually the child ceased crying, and after a few minutes, indeed, he burst into the warm parlour at home, startling his mother and Aunt Binney, who were seated by the fire. His hat had fallen off, his boots were clogged with snow, and he was, as we know, jacketless. But his eyes were bright and eager, and his face flushed with excitement.

"I've brought you a visitor," he cried. "I found this little lady in the snow, all alone. She was almost frozen, so I brought her to you to thaw. It's the Squire's little wench."

Miss Belinda would have taken her from him, but with a cry of surprise and pleasure Mrs. Fleetwood held out her arms.

"Give her to me. Give the sweet, pretty creature to me. What a way they must be in at the Hall about her! Go quickly, Simon, and tell Joe to let them know that we have found her, and that she is quite safe. And, Belinda, would it not be well to prepare a warm drink for the dear little girl?"

She had drawn her closer to the fire as she spoke, and now began with eager haste to unfasten the strings of the child's beaver bonnet and little pelisse.

"Dear heart, dear heart, she's as cold as any stone! Come, let us take off the shoes and warm the poor little feet."

Simon retired to do his mother's bidding, and returned

presently to announce that the messenger had been despatched. His father had entered meanwhile, and the group round the wide hearth made a pretty picture. Simon's mother, her face alight with admiring tenderness, was bending over her little charge to whom Aunt Binney, squatting on the floor in the firelight, was presenting, with diverse blandishments, a cup of oatmeal posset. The little girl was sitting up looking about her with bright inquiring eyes. Simon had never seen the like of those eyes before; they were like stars, he said to himself. The head, with its thick crop of dark curls, was beautifully set on the little round neck, the contour of which could now be seen since the removal of the pelisse. Beneath the frills of the muslin frock two small bare feet stretched themselves towards the blaze. As he entered his mother weighed them gently in one hand.

"Do you see, Mr. Fleetwood?" she asked, glancing upwards towards the corner where her husband stood smiling with that rather sad smile of his which puzzled Simon, "do you see what beautiful little feet? See the fine ankle, and the instep, how high and arched! I'll warrant that water would run under the sole of this foot if one were to try. She is a jewel altogether. Mark me the turn of her head, and this fine little hand. Why, Simon's hand at a year old was broader."

"Aye, aye, I'll engage it was," returned her husband.

Mrs. Fleetwood pressed the child to her almost passionately.

"Would that she were mine!" she cried. "I should have had a child like this that I could understand and love."

The cry was almost involuntary, and the eyes of father and son met in a glance of equal sadness and endurance. Looking up in her turn Mrs. Fleetwood saw the glance and felt remorseful.

"I should dearly have liked you to have a sister, Simon," she said, half-apologetically. "It is quite right for you to be big—boys ought to be big, and you are like your father, you see. If I had had a little daughter she might have been like my people. All the Westons are finely made, and have delicate, straight features like this little dear. I could have dressed her so pretty, and she'd have stayed at home with me when you and your father were out. I can't help envying Madam Charnock."

"Good Lord!" cried her husband, speaking for once with some impatience, "Madam Charnock, poor lady, would give all in the world to be the mother of such a fine boy as yours, ma'am."

A little later the Squire himself endorsed this statement. He came bustling in, very grateful to the Fleetwoods for having come to the rescue of his only child, and much relieved at the discovery of her whereabouts. But his displeasure with the little maid herself was in proportion to his previous anxiety; he rated her soundly while her new friends assisted her to don shoes and socks, pelisse and bonnet. She had answered his questions frankly and fearlessly; she wanted to see Cousin Humphrey and the other boys skate, and had slipped away while nurse was putting on her bonnet. She had run so fast, so fast, but could not catch them up; and when she had come to the woods she could not find her way, and the cold had made her cry, and then "the boy" had found her.

"You will please forgive her, sir," put in Mrs. Fleetwood softly. "She is such a little girl, and she did not mean to be naughty, did you, my pretty?"

The star-like eyes were raised to the soft and somewhat faded ones which were looking down so kindly, and after a moment's reflection, the curly head nodded emphatically:—

"Yes, I did. I thought I *would* be naughty for once, I like being naughty."

Mr. Fleetwood laughed heartily, and the Squire joined in; the child's manner was so quaint and so deliberate: Mrs. Fleetwood laughed too, though she feigned to be shocked, but Miss Belinda, who had no great sense of humour, was much scandalised.

"Well!" she ejaculated, "that's a pretty way for a lass to speak. Our poor Simon, little as you think of him, would never behave so."

She spoke in an undertone, intending the remark only for Sister Fleetwood, and perhaps her brother, but the Squire heard.

"Simon," he repeated. "Ah, yes, it was he who found my little wench. Where is the lad? What was it you were saying? Somebody thinks little of him? Why, no one surely could think little of this fine boy. Neighbour Fleetwood, I never see him but I envy you. How he grows, to be sure! You must be proud of your son, Mrs. Fleetwood?"

"She is, Squire, she is," put in the yeoman hastily, seeing that his wife looked somewhat disconcerted, and being always anxious to extricate her from any difficulty. "But she has fairly lost her heart to your beautiful little lass. She was saying as you came in that she would give all the world to have such a child, and she is in the right of it—she is in the right of it, for sure."

The genuine admiration with which the pair looked at the little girl could not but be flattering to Mr. Charnock, who was one of those men to whom the fact that anything belongs to them gives a unique value to the property in question. He had been much disgusted and disappointed at the advent of his daughter, but, in addition to his natural paternal affection, he felt a proud

interest in the child. She was his offspring, a Charnock of Charnleigh, and the appreciation even of inferior folk seemed in some manner to reflect credit on the head of the family. He smiled now, well pleased, and tapped the crown of the be-feathered little bonnet.

"Why then," he cried gaily, "she must make friends with you, Mrs. Fleetwood. She must come and see you sometimes when she goes out a-riding on her pony. Will you not, Rachel?"

"Rachel! what a pretty name!" murmured Mrs. Fleetwood.

"A family name," returned Mr. Charnock affably, for was not the name, too, the property of the Charnocks? "Yes, there have been Rachel Charnocks for generations —a great great-aunt of mine was Rachel—Rachel the Rake they used to call her—not a very flattering title—but, egad, she was a beauty, and no mistake! You can see her picture yonder at the house. She turned the world topsy-turvy for a time. The little one here has eyes like her, though I fancy hers were darker."

"Perhaps she, too, will turn the world topsy-turvy," cried Mrs. Fleetwood.

"Heaven forbid!" said the honest Yeoman.

CHAPTER III.

Her every tone is music's own,
Like those of morning birds,
And something more than melody
Dwells ever in her words;
The coinage of her heart are they,
And from her lip each flows,
As one may see the burden'd bee,
Forth issue from the rose.

—POE.

MADAM CHARNOCK came to the Farm next day at an early hour, so early, in fact, that Mrs. Fleetwood, who was tired by the excitements of the previous evening, had not yet left her room. The lady took a seat as requested in the oak parlour, and Simon entertained her while his father went upstairs to announce her arrival. Aunt Binney happened to have an engagement in the dairy that morning, and had, indeed, hastened out of the room a moment before the arrival of the Squire's lady, only just in time to save herself from the ignominy of receiving her in bedgown and petticoat. Madam Charnock had grown much older, Simon thought, since that memorable day when he had helped to welcome her home. There were silver threads in the abundant dark hair, and many lines about the mouth and the sweet gracious eyes. Far more lines than were to be seen in the face of Simon's invalid mother; and yet surely she was the elder of the two. Simon stood in the lady's presence, and her eyes travelled slowly over his face and figure with a certain curious regretful gaze which made the boy feel both shy and sad. When she at length

broke silence, however, she gave no indication of her previous thoughts. She spoke English well, but with a slight foreign accent that the boy thought rather pretty.

"You were very good to my little girl yesterday. I thank you for it with all my heart. Some boys would not have been so kind to a little stranger."

Simon blushed fiery red and made no answer.

"I suppose," she continued, "it is your mother who has taught you to be so gentle?"

"No, madam," returned Simon, "it is my father."

As she looked questioningly at him, her surprise being evident, the sound of a firm and somewhat ponderous tread was heard descending the stairs and crossing the hall, and Simon hastening to the door opened it. Mr. Fleetwood came in carrying, as was his custom, his wife in his arms. He set her gently on the ground, and while she made her apologies and explanations to the visitor, he and Simon wheeled forward the couch and arranged the cushions.

"I think you ought to lie down, my dear," he said, addressing his wife, who had remained standing. "I am sure you will excuse her, ma'am," he explained, turning to Mrs. Charnock. "My wife is not in good health, and she is very subject to a kind of giddiness when she first comes down of a morning."

The Squire's lady having added her entreaties to his, Mrs. Fleetwood was induced to lie down, and submitted, with the languid pleasure with which an invalid usually accepts such attention in the presence of an interested onlooker, to the comfortable adjustment of her cushions and the covering of her feet with a shawl. Simon, who had assisted in carrying out these arrangements, now obeyed a signal to withdraw, and father and son respectfully took their leave of their guest.

Mrs. Fleetwood had closed her eyes for a moment—

partly because she was really feeling weak and giddy, and partly because she was determined that the fact should not pass unnoticed—and was surprised when she opened them to discover that Madam Charnock's were full of tears. A pang of acute personal anxiety shot through her—did she really look so very ill? She had been ill so long—but sometimes strangers saw things.

"Do you think?" she stammered, without pausing to consider her words—"Oh, Madam, do you think that I am going to die?"

"No, no," said Mrs. Charnock, speaking soothingly; "you look, of course, delicate, but delicate people, you know, live the longest, particularly when they are taken such good care of. These foolish tears of mine come for quite another reason—a very selfish reason, which I must not trouble you about. Every one, you know, has their troubles."

"Oh," sighed Mrs. Fleetwood, "that is indeed too true"—and she turned up her pretty pale eyes.

The other glanced at her quickly, and for a moment an expression of surprise, dashed with something like indignation, passed over her face.

"Surely," she said, after a pause, "with the exception of your ill-health you have no troubles? I must not, indeed," she went on more gently, "fail to sympathise with you in what must be very trying, very painful, but still—oh, when I saw that good, kind husband of yours carry you in, and when I saw his devotion and that of your boy, I thought within myself that surely you must be the happiest woman alive."

Mrs. Fleetwood sat up, too much taken aback at first to speak; she had never hitherto considered her position as anything but a melancholy one.

"You do not know my circumstances, perhaps," she said presently. "I—I made a great *mésalliance* in

marrying Mr. Fleetwood. I am a gentlewoman by birth—my family was formerly much considered in Yorkshire. Mr. Fleetwood was not my equal, but," she added in an apologetic tone, "I was all alone in the world, and I did not know what to do or how to live, and he was so kind. He has always done his very best to make up to me for the change in my circumstances; you cannot think how generous and considerate he is. But of course, I cannot help feeling that I have cut myself off from my proper sphere. I am nothing but a yeoman's wife: nobody visits me, no one recognises that I have the right to move in good society. I have not a single friend. So you see I am not so happy as you think."

"I do not see," returned Madam Charnock a little coldly, "why that should be—with a husband who adores you, who is gentle, courteous, chivalrous—ah, madam, I can tell you many of his so-called superiors could learn a lesson from him! With such a son as yours—Heavens! how many mothers would give their heart's blood for such a son!—what do such small things matter?"

"It is very lonely," murmured Mrs. Fleetwood, anxious to justify herself.

"Lonely!" echoed the other vehemently. "There are different kinds of loneliness, I suppose, just as there are different kinds of happiness. Some people, you know, have to leave kindred and country to dwell among strange folk and adapt themselves to strange customs. They may see company in abundance, but surely the people who come and go can best be called acquaintances, one has left one's friends behind. Still while one retains the love of husband and child one cannot say one is lonely. See," she added with a little laugh, that somehow sounded very sad, "I have been talking of my own case.

I have, you see, some little troubles—I, too, have sometimes missed all that I used to know and love in my own country; at times when I realise how very, very far away I am, the tears will come."

"But surely sometimes, madam," said Mrs. Fleetwood, "you visit France—the journey is not such a very tedious one."

"France is not my country," explained Mrs. Charnock. "The people here, I fancy," she pursued with a smile, "set down every foreigner as French. But I am Hungarian. My country is a long way off, and the journey thither is complicated and difficult. But, after all, these are minor things; one can always be happy in doing one's duty."

"It is indeed sad, madam, that you have no son," said Mrs. Fleetwood, reverting to what she justly felt was her visitor's greatest sorrow; "but your little angel of a daughter——"

"Ah, yes; I myself am quite happy with my child. My greatest grief is the disappointment to my husband. But it is the will of God, and we must submit." Then, assuming a lighter tone, she changed the subject.

This conversation had a great effect upon Mrs. Fleetwood. It opened her eyes, not only to the fact that even Squires' ladies had their troubles, but that her union with this great kind yeoman husband was considered a very enviable matter rather than a fatal mistake. The subsequent visits of Madam Charnock—often repeated, for she was urged to such acts of kindness by the great pleasure evinced by the sickly little woman, and also by her own interest in the unusual household—had a most beneficial influence on the recipient. Fretful and unreasonable Mrs. Fleetwood would always be, but she seemed on the whole more contented, and to a certain extent appreciated the kind-

ness and tenderness with which for so many years she had been surrounded.

The yeoman's indulgence increased, as time went by, to such an extent that Miss Belinda found it impossible to refrain from remonstrating with him. She had with difficulty held her peace when he had purchased the chaise, and had long murmured in secret over his senseless coddling and cosseting of her sister-in-law; but when it came to his converting the best bedroom into a sitting-room for her especial use, actually carpeting the polished floor, and painting the oak-panelled walls, in the periodical rubbing-up of which she herself had not disdained to assist, she felt that it was time to speak out her mind. Her brother, however, was firm, even peremptory; desiring her somewhat sharply not to interfere with his arrangements, and on no account to annoy his wife by protestations on the subject. Such was life, Miss Belinda meditated in bitterness of spirit; a body got no thanks for taking an interest in things. Goodness knew if *she* did not take an interest in that house everything would go to rack and ruin. Sister Fleetwood thought of nothing but herself and her own megrims; there would never be a single gooseberry bottled, nor so much as a drop of elderberry wine made from one year's end to the other, if she did not see to it herself. And as to the painting of the oak panels, she reckoned she had a good right to complain, for had she not been born in that very room? And that was more than her sister-in-law could boast of. Meanwhile, the transformation effected, if somewhat barbarous from an æsthetic point of view, did, no doubt, lend the room a cheerful appearance. When Mrs. Fleetwood finally took possession of it, and glanced round at the buff walls, the carpet with its bunches of roses, and the bright chintzes, her delight and gratitude knew no bounds.

"You are very good to me, Husband," she said, glancing up at him affectionately as he stood by her couch. He stooped and kissed her, and then turned away somewhat abruptly, for his eyes had grown suddenly dim, as they had often done of late when they rested on her.

Mrs. Fleetwood, however, noticed nothing, and when the Squire's lady came to see the pretty new room her joy was complete. Little Rachel, too, was quite delighted with the room. She often came to sit with Mrs. Fleetwood, who took endless pleasure in teaching her some of the pastimes which occupied so many of her own hours. How to make spills with wonderful feathery tops, and shell-boxes, and little pasteboard houses covered with the pith of rushes, with gravel walks made of sand and glittering ore, and little pith men and women inside. "She was growing a tall girl now, and would soon have to go to school," her mother said with a sigh.

When Simon came home for the holidays that year, he was struck by a certain increase of gravity in his father's look and manner which surprised him, for otherwise the home atmosphere seemed to him brighter than usual. There was a splendid harvest to begin with, and the colts which Mr. Fleetwood intended to dispose of at Ormskirk Fair would reflect credit on him as a breeder of such cattle. Then he liked the sunny little parlour upstairs. It was pleasant to sit there quietly with his mother, without Aunt Binney fussing in and out—for that lady steadfastly adhered to a resolution, first formed in angry disappointment, of never setting foot in that desecrated chamber—and his mother herself seemed so much more cheerful and content. Her altered demeanour, indeed, encouraged Simon to hope that she would accede to a certain petition which he meant to make before his vacation came to an end.

This was his last year at Eton, and he was glad at the prospect of leaving, for his life there had been much less pleasant since his quarrel with young Humphrey Charnock. Humphrey was an ungenerous enemy, and had managed to alienate many of Simon's favourite companions from him on their return to school, after the dispute on the ice. Boys for the most part are not snobbish, but some of his schoolfellows could not help being influenced by Humphrey's fancy pictures of Simon's home and parents, and, as their altered attitude towards him caused him to assume a proud and somewhat defiant demeanour, he was soon set down as an insolent upstart. He had made no complaint, however, had forborne to retaliate on Humphrey—who had, indeed, been careful to refrain from any open attack—and had merely held himself aloof from those who despised him. But he was, nevertheless, keenly conscious of his anomalous position, and, moreover, aware that the course of education marked out for him was ill-adapted to his future position in life. He meant, if possible, to avoid the college career which was to succeed his term at Eton.

One day his opportunity came for discussing the matter with his father. They had gone together to show the colts before alluded to to a neighbour, a farmer in a large way, though not of such high standing as Mr. Fleetwood. When they set forth together, Mrs. Fleetwood, looking down from her mullioned window, felt something that was almost pride as she contemplated her son. He was now nearly eighteen, and as tall as his father. Simon's shoulders, too, were like his, but his figure, besides the litheness and suppleness of youth, possessed a certain grace which must have always been absent from the yeoman's. The carriage of the head actually reminded Mrs. Fleetwood of her own father's, and her heart gave a throb of joy as she realised that,

after all, the Weston blood was beginning to tell in this stalwart son of hers. But when burly Farmer Rushton met the pair in the great pasture, his talk was at first all of the extraordinary likeness between father and son. Simon drove up for his closer inspection the three-year-old colt which they were already beginning to handle and train, and when, after a little preliminary fondling and soothing, he vaulted on the noble creature's back and made it carry him at break-neck speed round the field, the enthusiasm of the good fellow knew no bounds.

"Eh, Neighbour Fleetwood, he's a rare 'un, he is, for sure. A true chip o' th' owd block *he* is. Never see sich a seet i' my life. Eh, yo' mun be proud on him."

Mr. Fleetwood thrust his thumbs into the pockets of his flowered waistcoat and chuckled. "Well, I am a bit proud, I'll own it," he said. "I couldn't do what he does now, but I'm very near as pleased to see him doing it. It brings back old times and makes me young again."

"He mun be gettin' on now, isn't he? My word, I'd finished my schoolin' long before I was half his height. Yo'll be for gettin' him awhoam soon, wunnot you?"

"Aye, he'll soon have finished school, but there's college to come next. He must put in a matter of three years there before he comes home for good."

"College? Why, what do yo' reckon to make of him?"

"He'll follow in my footsteps, won't ye, lad?" said Mr. Fleetwood, as Simon, having finished his course round the field, and dismissed his steed with a resounding pat or two, now joined them.

"Yes, that I will," agreed the lad warmly. "I'll follow as close as ever I can."

"Well said!" cried the friend, clapping him on the shoulder. "Well, neighbour, every man knows his own

business best, but I should ha' thought it waste o' time to send that chap to college. All the Latin and Greek in the world won't help wi' th' farmin'. And as for figures—i' my opinion, them new fangled ways o' contrivin' wi' figures is good for nought but to addle a man's brains. Why, what wi' X's and crosses and dashes and dots, it's fair moiderin'. And at the end of it all ye can't prove theer's more nor twenty hundredweight to a ton!"

Simon looked eagerly at his father, but the latter's eyes were bent on the ground.

"There are reasons, you see," he said hesitatingly, "special reasons, in Simon's case."

He changed the subject abruptly, but Simon resumed it when he was alone with Mr. Fleetwood. As they were walking across the pasture together, after the departure of their friend, he said diffidently,—

"My dear father, I cannot help feeling that Mr. Rushton is right. I wish you and my mother could be persuaded to give up the idea of sending me to college."

"What," cried the yeoman, smiling good-naturedly if a little constrainedly, "tired o' the books already?"

"Nay, sir, I like the books well enough, but I should have preferred to make their acquaintance in another place."

"Why, I thought you were getting on first rate yonder."

"I have got on tolerably well," returned the lad gravely, "but you see, sir, I am not and never shall be a gentleman. I come of yeoman stock—I am a true chip of the old block, as Mr. Rushton says, and I do not think it will ever take polish."

"Aye, aye?" said the yeoman thoughtfully.

"I am in my proper place here," pursued Simon.

"All that you do I can do, and like doing. I fancy that I could even do many things that you do not think it necessary to put your own hand to. I can drive a team—I almost imagine that I could plough a furrow.

"Could you indeed, Simon?" said Mr. Fleetwood, pausing and turning so as to face him. "Aye, lad, I reckon that kind of thing runs in the blood."

"I breathe freely here," cried his son eagerly. "I feel myself at ease. Do but listen to me, sir."

The father had thrown his arm affectionately round his son's neck, and now tapped his shoulder lightly.

"You are forgetting one thing, my lad—my promise to your mother."

"I know—I have thought of it—but could you not reason with her—explain to her."

"Nay, nay," returned Mr. Fleetwood gravely and gently. "There's sense enough in what you say, but I cannot go back on my promise. First, because I have never yet broken my word to your mother, and, secondly, because I am particularly anxious to spare her all annoyance just now. My dear lad, I am loth to grieve you, but you must know it sooner or later—I fear me your poor mother is not long for this world."

"Oh, Father, are you sure?" Tears were springing to Simon's blue eyes. "I thought," he went on falteringly —"my mother has always been so delicate—as long as I can remember she has been complaining—I thought, I almost hoped ——"

"You thought it was nothing worse than woman's vapours," said his father, putting into words what he had not ventured to say outright. "Nay, be not so shamefaced, Simon, there's more than thee have made the same mistake. I myself—but there's no use in talking of that now. It may not be for some time yet, so the physician from Ormskirk tells me; she might

even last for years, or she may be taken from us in a few months, but we must make up our minds to lose her, boy."

His honest, kindly face worked and his voice shook; had this poor little peevish, useless wife of his been the most admirable of helpmeets his heart could not have been more wrung at the prospect of losing her.

"You may count on me," said Simon in a low voice, "to do all in my power to please her—while I can."

They clasped hands in silence and then walked quietly on. The shadow of Death had fallen for the first time across Simon's path, and it seemed to him that all the world was dark with it. After a time, glancing at his father and noting the anguish still so plainly discernible in the rugged face, he impulsively endeavoured to console him.

"Take comfort, Dad; with such care as she is like to have my dear mother may perhaps be spared to us many years. She looks better than I have seen her for some time, and is certainly brighter and happier."

"Aye, ye've noticed that, have ye, lad? I have thought so, too, of late, and thanked God for it. And have you observed, Simon, how gentle she speaks to me now, and how she seems to turn to me? I feared sometimes," he went on naïvely, "that it might not be altogether a good sign—but I don't know but what it may be after all."

"Ah," broke out Simon, "how can she fail to turn to you? Good Lord, when I think of your forbearance, your tenderness, your devotion! Surely my mother is the happiest wife in all the world!"

"No, no, Simon, I doubt if one can say that. Ye see, with the best intentions I wronged her in marryin' her—thou art a man now, and I think no harm of speaking out my mind plain to thee. See thou, Simon,

I had no right to marry her—'twas well meant, but 'twas cruel. I thought to do her a kindness in persuading her to take me, for you see, Simon, she'd neither father nor mother, poor soul, and scarce a penny i' th' world. I thought her relations 'ud be well enough pleased to know she was provided for at no cost to themselves; but instead of that they made such a to-do as never was, and cast her off, one and all. I shouldn't ha' hurried her, ye see—I should have given her time to think and talk it over with her friends."

There was a pause, the elder man walking meditatively along with his hands behind him; the younger struggling with many conflicting emotions. He had always worshipped his father, and there were times when, in his young enthusiasm, he could have fallen at his feet; this was one of them. By-and-bye he said in a somewhat unsteady voice:—

"After all, would any one have cherished her as you did?"

"There's comfort in that—aye, there's comfort in that. Another man, perhaps, might not have understood her so well. There be folks, Simon," went on the yeoman, with burning indignation, "who think it a sign of weakness to be considerate to a woman; selfish bullies, lad, who brag about being masters in their own homes. One can be master without being tyrant; and believe me, lad, it is no sign of weakness to be gentle with the weak—it is the other way round. Bear it in mind, my boy, be gentle because you are strong."

All his life long Simon remembered his father's words; they fell indeed upon generous ground, where they were likely to fructify. But, as far as his mother was concerned, he needed not to alter his attitude; his affection for her, though differing in kind and degree from the love awarded to his father, had always been

deep and devoted, but now it took on a new tenderness and solicitude. He watched her almost as anxiously as Mr. Fleetwood, eager to anticipate her needs, and ever fearful least she should fatigue or injure herself. It happened thus that one sultry summer's night, fancying that he heard unusual sounds proceeding from his parents' room, he crept softly to the door and listened—could she be worse, what was that sound within?

"Thou'lt soon rest now, Sweetheart," his father's voice was saying, with the crooning tenderness a nurse might use to a sick child. "Eh, it's bad to sleep so ill. Come, we'll take another turn, and I'll sing again—the mischief is I can only remember that one song—thou must be tired of it."

"Nay, I like it," returned Simon's mother. "But do not carry me round and round, my dear—it makes me giddy. Carry me up and down from one end of the room to the other—and then across."

"Ah, 't will be better for sure. Now, wrap this shawl round thee—come, let's start."

And forthwith a measured step sounded from the room within, and the yeoman began to troll in his deep bass voice, which had once been a fine one, a certain ditty, no doubt familiar to him in his youth, with quaint, old-fashioned words and a tune at once lively and pathetic. The gay, foolish verses succeeded each other. There was something about sparking it in the sunny time of youth, and about somebody sitting on somebody else's knee, and the refrain trailed away in the minor:—

I'll hang my harp on the hollow willow tree,
And may the world fare well with thee,
Well with thee!

As he listened Simon sobbed to himself.

CHAPTER IV.

To these, whom death again did wed,
This grave's their second marriage-bed.
For though the hand of Fate could force
'Twixt soul and body a divorce,
It could not sunder man and wife,
'Cause they both lived but one life.

—CRASHAW.

THOUGH the anxiety of her husband and son did not decrease as time went by, there was no material change in Mrs. Fleetwood's condition for more than three years; but when Simon returned definitely to the Farm, after taking his degree, he was conscious that the disease so long held in check had made subtle ravages. After the first glance at his mother's face his eyes instinctively sought his father's, and he understood without need of words that the time now remaining to her could not be long.

She herself, however, seemed to be in good spirits, and received Simon with real affection and pleasure. He had brought her, as a present on this his home-coming, two large china jars which he had picked up in a curiosity shop at Oxford, and the pattern of which pretty nearly matched some china already in her possession. "They will just do for pot-pourri," she cried. "I have not made any this year, and you know there is a special receipt in my family. All our friends used to beg for it. I am impatient to begin to make it while the roses last. Dear me, I want so many things for it—I must have benzoin, storax, cassia-buds—and then

cardamom and vanilla. You have some oil of jasmin and attar of roses, have you not, Sister Belinda? I could begin to-morrow if I only had the spices."

"Do not let that trouble you, my love," cried her husband, "for I have business in Liverpool to-morrow, and will bring them back."

He was gone early on the following morning, which proved so bright and sunny that Mrs. Fleetwood's satisfaction was complete.

"One could not have better weather for pot-pourri making," she exclaimed, almost with the glee of a child. "You must know, Simon, that the roses should be gathered as dry as possible. If only your father would come back early enough to carry me round the garden, we would gather them to-day."

"Cannot I carry you, Mother?" asked Simon. "I am as tall as my father, and quite as strong."

She looked up at him smiling. "True, true. I was forgetting that you were a grown man now. I should like it of all things, Simon."

He lifted her up, carefully arranging her white kerchief so that it should shield her face from the sun, and carried her down the stairs. He felt an almost overpowering emotion in thus bearing in his arms his mother, and as he glanced down at her face he saw a new tenderness in it. There was a flush on the thin cheeks, and the large bright eyes glistened.

"To think that my son should be carrying me in his arms like a baby!" she said. "It seemed natural enough that your father should do it: I am used to being taken care of by him. But you, Simon! It seems but the other day that I was crying because your father had cut off your curls. You cannot remember it, of course, you were so young then, but at the time I thought I should have broke my heart."

Simon did remember, better, perhaps, than she did; but all the bitterness which the recollection might have contained died away at once and for ever at the sound of the weak little laugh, and at the caressing touch upon his face of the wasted little hand. As it passed his lips he kissed it passionately, and she looked up into his handsome face with pride as well as tenderness.

"My fine son!" she said. "My tall, strong son!"

He carried her round the garden, picking his way amid the labyrinth of box-bordered paths, and pausing ever and anon before a rose-tree. Then his mother lifted her head from his shoulder and inspected it from beneath the shelter of her kerchief; sometimes the bush in question was condemned, and sometimes Simon had to stoop with her that she might herself touch, examine, and smell the roses. When she had made her selection he was to deposit her on a couch in the shade, and to collect the flowers she had chosen.

It happened that before they had completed their round Madam Charnock came stepping daintily across the grass-plot and paused under the big yew tree to survey the scene. As she gazed, the old wound in her heart throbbed painfully. She knew the woman before her had not long to live, yet it seemed to her for a moment that she would willingly change places with her. Many a time afterwards did the vision rise before her of that sunlit garden: the long lines of bloom thrown into relief by the yew hedge, the tall figure of the young man, the handsome face bending with such eager solicitude over the frail little mother—it was all stamped upon her memory. This woman, too, had besought the Lord to give her a man-child, and the petition had been denied. Since the death, long years before, of her stalwart soldier father she had not known what it was to meet in the eyes of man a look of protecting

tenderness such as that which the stripling before her was bestowing on his mother. She pressed her hands upon her bosom with an involuntary little sob, and then, turning swiftly, went away all unperceived by the other two.

Simon, too, long remembered that summer's day and the subsequent making of the pot-pourri which had so pleased and interested his mother; the layers of rose leaves spread out in her sunny window-seat, the faint, sweet smell of the gums and spices which pervaded the whole house, the small figure, propped up with cushions, so eagerly directing, the thin hands so busy and yet so weak. He remembered how once the wedding-ring had slipped from the emaciated finger, and gone circling round and round on the fine rose-patterned carpet, falling at length almost at his father's feet. He remembered how hastily his father had picked it up and restored it to its place, and then how quickly he had gone out of the room.

With the making of the pot-pourri it often seemed to Simon that his youth had come to an end, for those bright summer days were followed by very dark ones. The invalid sank rapidly, and Simon, who had been bracing himself to bear manfully his own sorrow and the overpowering grief of his father, was of a sudden subjected to a trouble far heavier than that which he had previously anticipated. For early in a wet and windy autumn Mr. Fleetwood fell dangerously ill. How it happened no one could tell—he had never known even a day's indisposition since Simon could remember; he had been wet through one afternoon, indeed, and had not changed his clothes for some hours, but then the same thing had often occurred before and no harm had resulted. He had had broken nights, no doubt, and many anxious days, when he cared neither to eat nor to take his accustomed

exercise, and these may possibly have impaired his vigorous constitution, but, from whatever cause, the effect was serious and alarming. Even the apothecary, hastily summoned, declared himself apprehensive. That great broad chest of Mr. Fleetwood was attacked, there was inflammation, not in one lung but in both, great pain, violent fever—he was of opinion that Mr. Simon would do well to seek further advice.

A mounted messenger was despatched forthwith to Ormskirk to summon the physician who had already attended Mrs. Fleetwood, and, meanwhile, Simon, poor lad! wandered distractedly from one sick-room to the other. Mrs. Fleetwood's little strength was ebbing fast; they had thought it well to conceal from her the serious nature of her husband's illness, and she had not ceased to call for him, at first fretfully, then anxiously, and at each renewal of the appeal Simon's heart was wrung within him. Yet he could better endure to hear this weak lament than his father's groans, between spasms of pain, at the mischance which had thus laid him by the heels at the very time when his wife most needed him.

"If she gets worse I must go to her, you know," he said, turning his eyes piteously towards his son. "Only think, boy, I have watched and waited on her all these years—and to be away from her at the last—it is not to be borne!"

A woman, perhaps, would have bethought her of some way of soothing such anxiety, but poor Simon, thoroughly convinced himself that his mother's last moments were fast approaching, could only look down at him with his miserable blue eyes and keep silence.

The longed-for visit of the great doctor, though eminently satisfactory to the apothecary, whose treatment of the case he was good enough to commend, brought little comfort to any one else. The drastic measures

in vogue at the time were again resorted to; Mr. Fleetwood was cupped and blistered and dosed with emetic tartar; but the doctor looked at him gravely, and warned Simon of his being in a very dangerous state. As to the other patient, he pronounced candidly that there was nothing to be done for her. The poor husband showed more anxiety on her account than on his own.

"If you can tell me that she is better, sir, or even that she is not much worse, you need not trouble about me; I shall soon be well."

Gravely and compassionately considering him, the doctor replied that Mrs. Fleetwood's condition was no worse than was to be expected at the actual stage of her malady, and the good yeoman, too straightforward himself to be aware of the frequency with which words are made to disguise rather than to convey their real meaning, was, for the time, satisfied. But towards evening he became very restless and uneasy; stretching out of a sudden one of his large burning hands, he asked Simon if Mother were asleep.

"She was not when I last saw her, sir," returned his son, to whom it never occurred to speak anything but the truth.

"I must go to her," said Mr. Fleetwood decisively. "She will not rest without I'm there, Simon. She wants me—I carry her about when the pain's bad."

"No, Father. The doctor said you must not stir from your bed. I will go to her if you will only promise to lie quiet. I can carry her about as well as you, you know. I have often done so."

"I doubt if that will satisfy her," returned Mr. Fleetwood faintly, "but thou can try."

Simon called old Susan to take his place in his father's room, and betook himself to what he already felt to be

the chamber of death. His mother's heavy eyelids were lifted as he entered, and she looked expectantly towards him as he crossed the room.

"Is it you, Husband?" she gasped, and a look of piteous disappointment overspread her face as she saw that it was her son. He bent over her.

"My father is not very well to-night, but we hope he will be quite himself to-morrow. Cannot I carry you about a little, dearest Mother, if you cannot rest?"

She shook her head feebly. "I want your father," she said. "Oh, Simon, go and tell him that he must come."

Simon looked distractedly at his aunt, who made warning signs to him from behind the curtain and accompanied him towards the door as Mrs. Fleetwood closed her eyes.

"La, how little gumption men have, to be sure," whispered she when they were out of earshot. "Can't ye pretend to go and fetch him, lad? One half of the time she doesn't know what she is saying. We shall just have to keep humouring her."

Simon crept back to his father's side, and was much relieved to find that he had fallen into a feverish doze.

Night came, and this drowsy state continued. Except for Mr. Fleetwood's heavy breathing and occasional sharp, hacking cough, there was no sound in the room. The rushlight flickered and burnt low, and Simon renewed it and lit another. As the fresh gleam fell across the bed Mr. Fleetwood stirred, and presently laughed. Poor Simon's blood froze in his veins; any groan of anguish would have been preferable to such a sound at such a moment.

"Why, Simon, lad," said his father in a cheerful tone, painfully at variance with the laboured breathing which every now and then interrupted it, "ye've got a bonny

lot, for sure. What, are you not going to pick any Maiden's Blush? They're the sweetest of all to my thinkin', and the prettiest—the very colour of thy mother's cheek."

Simon thought of the poor drawn, pallid face in the room over the way, and groaned within himself.

"I've got 'em all here," pursued Mr. Fleetwood in his husky, broken voice. "I made the chap yonder put 'em all up in one packet. I was afraid o' losin' one of 'em else—such a many little parcels, thou knows. I had to try in two and three places for the cassia-buds, but I got 'em in the end. Take 'em all to your mother, lad, take 'em."

His eyes were fixed on Simon, but apparently without seeing him, for he presently began to call for him, and to express wonder at his not appearing. Poor Simon had never seen any one in delirium before, and his father's wanderings threw him into an agony of fear. It seemed to him a strange and most dangerous development of the malady, and one with which he felt himself quite unable to cope. He ran hastily to his mother's room, and beckoned to Miss Belinda.

"My father is wandering," he cried breathlessly. "He does not know me. I am going to fetch Mr. Richmond at once. He looks so strange—oh, Aunt Belinda, what shall we do?"

Aunt Belinda crossed the passage and peered in at Mr. Fleetwood's door. He was muttering to himself and plucking at the sheet.

"Best go, my dear, at once," she said, turning a scared face upon Simon. "He looks very bad, and I don't like that fashion o' pullin' at the sheet. 'Tis a bad sign. I'll call Susan to sit here till you come back."

"And my mother?" queried poor Simon with white lips.

"Your mother is quieter this last hour or so; she kept callin' and callin' for your father the first part of the night, but she has given over now."

"Oh, Aunt Binney," cried the lad, scarce knowing what he said, "you musn't let her die till I come back. If my father cannot be with her, I must. Oh, poor Mother!"

He hurried off to the stable, put the horse in the gig, and drove as fast as he could urge the bewildered animal through the night to the village, where after some difficulty he succeeded in arousing the apothecary. The few minutes' delay necessary before that functionary could appear caused Simon to chafe with impatience, and when he at last approached he seized him by the arm and pulled him without ceremony into the gig.

"I'll tell you what the matter is as we go along," he cried, whipping up the horse.

The dawn was breaking when they arrived at the Farm, and Miss Belinda met them on the doorstep. "My dear nephew," she cried, "I scarce know how to tell you what has happened."

Simon threw the reins on the horse's back and jumped to the ground, the animal making its way round to the stable by itself.

"Not dead?" he cried hoarsely.

"No, no; they are both alive, thank God! But, my dear, they are both together. Not above half an hour after you left your mother stirred and began callin' again for her husband; and all of a sudden I heard somebody fumbling at the door, and in walked your father. Eh, Simon, I thought 'twas his ghost, he looked so tall and awful wi' his white face and his fixed eyes! He came stumblin' an' staggerin' across the room, and stooped over the bed. 'I've come, sweetheart,' said he. 'I know you can't rest—I've come to sing to you. I'll

sing in a minute or two,' says he, 'when I get my breath'. He made a shift to lift her in his arms, but he was too weak, ye know, and he fell all of a heap across the bed wi's head on her pillow. And there he is still, for none of us dare shift him. Susan and me just managed to get him up on the bed altogether, and we covered him wi' blankets and that, but eh dear! I doubt he'll get his death. I can never forgive Susan—her eyes were that heavy, she says, she dropped off as she was sittin' by the bed and never heard him stir."

As soon as Simon had taken in the drift of this voluble explanation he pushed past his aunt, and hastened upstairs. There, indeed, they lay side by side, his father's noble head bent close to the little white-capped one which had so long moved restlessly on its solitary pillow. One great feeble arm was thrown across her, the large languid hand endeavouring, it would seem, to press her closer to the broad heaving breast. Richmond pushed past Simon and laid a finger on the yeoman's wrist; then he shook his head.

"Can you do nothing?" asked Simon sharply. "Shall we carry him to his own room?"

"Nay, nay, leave him in peace. Nothing can hurt him now."

"Do you mean to say," cried the young man, almost fiercely, "that he is going?"

"Bear up, my poor lad," said the apothecary, "they are both—nearly gone."

Not quite, though; for Mrs. Fleetwood at that moment raised her head, and, with an evident effort, moved on the pillow so as to lean it on the shoulder where it had so often found rest. The action roused her husband from his semi-unconscious state; he lifted his fingers up and down with a gentle patting movement, and he endeavoured to murmur something, almost inarticulately

however. But Simon, bending low, caught the words:—

"I'll hang my harp on the hollow willow tree,
And may the world—may the world ——

I cannot remember the words to-night, love, but I will carry you—I will carry you just now".

"What is he saying?" inquired Mr. Richmond, craning his head forward from the foot of the bed.

Simon raised himself with a white, convulsed face. "Go out of the room," he cried, "if you can do no good. I will not have you prying at them. And now, Aunt Binney and Susan," he added, when the other had withdrawn, much affronted, "kneel down. Good God! how can you stand gaping at them when they are at the gates of Eternity?"

They all knelt down, and Simon, clasping his hands, began in firm, manly tones, "Let us pray ——" and then, being but a lad, after all, on the point of losing all which he had hitherto cherished and clung to, his self-possession deserted him, and he fell a-sobbing.

But they were beyond the reach of his voice; they had gone far on the long journey which the little mother had so much dreaded. The gates were open which were soon to close behind them both; but she had no fear now, for the loving arms which had so long sustained her were clinging close about her—they would carry her all the way.

PART II.

THE TREE.

CHAPTER V.

She was a Phantom of delight
When first she gleamed upon my sight;
A lovely Apparition, sent
To be a moment's ornament;
Her eyes as stars of Twilight fair;
Like Twilight's, too, her dusky hair;
But all things else about her drawn
From May-time and the cheerful dawn.

—WORDSWORTH.

ONE autumn evening six years afterwards Simon Fleetwood walked slowly homewards over the furrows and stubble-land, and through the driving rain. Even in the dusk his eye took note of his surroundings and his mind registered certain facts to be dealt with on the morrow: an improvement to be effected here, a piece of negligence to be repaired yonder. The neighbours said young Yeoman Fleetwood had a wonderful long head of his own; his labourers knew that they durst not take advantage of his youth or of a certain pensive habit which sometimes overtook him, for though the master might speak little he knew a great deal, and those keen blue eyes of his were very wide-awake. He was not so hearty in his ways as the old master, the workpeople said, but they loved him just as well if they feared him a little more. He was less sociable and neighbourly than his father, former cronies of the latter opined; too fond of his books, too

careless of good company. They liked a chap of his years to have a bit more go in him. An occasional merry evening at the Charnock Arms would have come more natural to him than poring of a night over his dull old books; but he was a fine young chap there was no denying that, and as steady as a rock. If he would marry and settle he would be right enough—he must have a poor life of it yonder with only that old maid to bear him company. But hitherto Simon had shown no great liking for female society; and now, as he walked homewards through the mist, he was thinking within himself that he was very lonely. He knew exactly what awaited him yonder at the Farm—just what had awaited him every night these six years. Dolly would appear in the passage to take his coat; Susan would emerge from the kitchen to say that the supper would spoil Aunt Binney's voice would inquire shrilly if he were very wet. They would have their evening meal together, during which she would relate such household news as she considered of interest to him; later on she would sit on one side of the hearth, darning his socks, and he would sit on the other, reading or casting up accounts. She would retire early, and he would follow her example in course of time.

In spring and summer the programme was varied by his going out after supper, but otherwise the seasons brought no change to this routine, unless when at rare intervals a friend dropped in, or he himself paid his respects to some one in the neighbourhood. But he felt out of his element on any other man's hearth than his own: for as time passed the words idly spoken by his mother often returned to his mind: "We are neither fish, flesh, nor fowl!" With his mature growth certain inherited instincts had declared themselves, instincts as influential in their way as those transmitted to him by

his father. He had been unconscious of them during his boyhood, yet his education had fostered them, and now in his grave and melancholy manhood they were making themselves felt. A certain fastidiousness and reserve caused him to hold aloof from his peers, and though he was totally devoid of his mother's craving to form part of a superior class of society, he was nevertheless frequently aware of his own solitary position. The books which at one time he had appreciated but indifferently had now become his best friends, though he only devoted to them hours which could not otherwise be employed, for he was above all a farmer. Those were good old times indeed for the cultivator of the land, and Simon was one who knew how to make the most of an opportunity; his prosperity was a source of astonishment to the neighbourhood, and of quiet satisfaction to himself.

The last gate of the last field had creaked upon its hinges, and now he was crossing the courtyard before the curious old black and white house. At one period of its existence the Farm had been "The Hall," having, indeed, been the residence of the lords of Charnleigh Manor before it had passed into the possession of the Charnocks, who had chosen a more central and convenient site for the rambling and commodious dwelling now occupied by their descendants. The Fleetwoods had been established at the Farm for more than two hundred years, but at what particular period Simon's forefathers had purchased the freehold of their lands he had never cared to ascertain. He liked, however, sometimes to meditate on the antiquity of his home; as he approached it now he gazed contentedly at its quaint gables, and wide small-paned windows, from some of which such ruddy streams of light were issuing. So ruddy, indeed, was that which proceeded from the long

line of windows in the oak-parlour that he was a little astonished. It wanted yet three weeks of November, and such a thing as a fire between April and November was unheard of under Miss Belinda's *régime*. He had actually the curiosity to make a circuit round the horse-block, and peer in at one of those uncurtained casements. Two pairs of tall "mould" candles were actually burning in the polished brass candlesticks on mantelshelf and sideboard, and there *was* a fire—a roaring, crackling log fire on the wide hearth. His aunt was standing with her back to the window, her head with its high comb bobbing and waggling in evident agitation and excitement. His father's carved high-backed chair was wheeled forward close to the glowing hearth, but it was empty, save for a long cloak which had been thrown across it. Basking in the comfortable radiance of the fire lay two great dogs, and as Simon peered in he could see the steam rising from their damp, curly coats. On the farther side of the hearth, directly facing him, a lady was standing with one little foot poised on the high brass fender, and holding in her hand a large black hat, the draggled feathers of which she was shaking out before the blaze. For a moment Simon thought the visitor was Madam Charnock; but he recollected himself with a smile. It was, indeed, two years since he had seen that lady, but her figure was not so tall, and could never have been, he thought, so slender; and though the little head with its clustering dark curls bore some resemblance to what hers had been when he first beheld her, the face with all its beauty, was more unlike than like that of the Squire's foreign bride. Simon stood rooted to the ground, and his heart began to beat with a sudden inexplicable emotion. Did the first sight of Rachel Charnock standing by his own hearth cause him to feel most joy or pain? How long he remained immovable,

he never subsequently knew. The rain was beating down upon him with renewed violence; a sharp wind came blustering round the corner of the house, but he heeded neither. He was taking note of the exquisite contours of Rachel's face and figure, of the long, graceful lines of her white draperies; and he remembered, with a sudden throb of delight, that he had once knelt in that very room by his mother's side when she had weighed that arched foot and its fellow in her own small palm, and that he himself had warmed those slender, milk-white hands in his boyish bosom. He remembered now the sensation of the little icy fingers; he seemed to feel their touch upon his breast, and yet his heart beneath was throbbing and burning.

All at once Miss Charnock raised her dark-fringed eyes and looked towards the window; Simon experienced a fresh shock as he met them. If they had seemed to him like stars in his boyhood, they appeared more star-like than ever now. The colour mounted to his brow in the dread of being detected in this equivocal position. He dared not move and trusted that the glance had merely been directed towards the casement in absence of mind, and that his own stillness and the darkness of the night would protect him. But, to his extreme discomposure, a look of surprise and amusement crossed the lovely face which had hitherto been so demure, and, moving away from the fire, Miss Rachel walked across the room and paused directly opposite the window.

So, with eyes nearly on a level—for the ground without sloped away from the house-wall, and she was tall, even in early girlhood—they looked at each other.

Then, with a little laugh, Rachel nodded to him.

"Come in, Mr. Simon," she cried gaily. "First I thought you must be a robber, and then I thought you might be a tramp, and now I find you to be the master

of the house prudently endeavouring to identify your visitor before you commit yourself by entering the room."

"La, it's never Simon," exclaimed Miss Belinda. "Eh, come in, do lad! Ye must be as wet as wet. But don't come in here whatever ye do wi' your wet clothes. There's a lady i' th' parlour, Simon."

She was in the hall now, and Simon had divested himself of hat and coat, and carefully wiped his great top-boots. Then, disregarding her injunctions, he made his way into the parlour, in the middle of which Rachel stood awaiting him. Their eyes were not on a level now, and as he approached her she had to raise hers quite a long way. The blush of confusion evoked by her discovery of him still lingered on his cheeks; his eyes were bright and eager, and his light-brown hair waved crisply in spite of the raindrops which powdered it. His face fell a little when the young lady greeted him with another little smiling nod and a sort of pretence of a curtsey, appearing not to see the hand which Simon had half-outstretched, but in a moment or two he recovered himself.

"I must apologise," he said, "for looking in upon you thus. It was thoughtless of me, particularly as I may have alarmed you, madam."

"I was not in the least alarmed, I thank you," she answered, moving towards the fire again, and raising the other little foot that it, too, might have its share of warmth.

"But I think," he said with his grave smile, "you told me you took me for a robber."

"Nay," she returned composedly, "I knew quite well all the time it could be no one but you."

"Well, now, that surprises me," put in Aunt Binney. "Ye must have wonderful good eyes, Miss Charnock, for I'm sure I could not see anything on the other side of

yon window at this time o' night. 'Twas very ill-done of you, Nephew; the young lady might, indeed, have took you for somebody quite different; and it beats me, I'm sure, Miss Charnock, to know however you could have guessed it was our Simon."

"It was very easily done," returned Miss Rachel, once more shaking the befeathered hat, "for I do not think I have ever seen so tall a man as Mr. Simon, nor yet so broad a one; and when I went closer I remembered his eyes."

She glanced over her shoulder at him as she spoke, eyeing him with a most dispassionate coolness, shaking her hat the while and turning about the little foot upon the fender. But, in spite of her careless glance and unconcerned demeanour, her words threw Simon into very deep confusion, and between that and his anxiety to account for his appearance at the window, his perplexity was extreme. But, luckily, at this moment a diversion was caused by the entrance of Dolly with the supper tray. Miss Fleetwood hastened to intercept her as she was about to place it on the table, informing her in a loud whisper, and with many nods and winks of intelligence, that they were not ready for supper just yet.

"Oh, madam, how can you be so cruel?" exclaimed their guest. "I was just congratulating myself on the appearance of that tray. I fancied I saw scones, and something very delightful in a glass dish, and I am positively fainting. Pray, Miss Fleetwood, order the tray back again."

"Eh, my word, I am but too fain!" cried Miss Belinda with a beaming smile. "I did not think—I scarce hoped you'd be so kind as to sit down with us—I'll call Dolly back in a minute."

"You are very good, indeed. I fear you must think me very bold for inviting myself in such a manner. And

as for you, Mr. Simon, I know not what you'll think. Here you come home at night-fall to find your house invaded and your substance claimed with neither 'by your leave' nor 'with your leave'. But I have been overtaken by the rain and your kind aunt has sent for my father's carriage. It will not come for some little time, and I am very hungry—so now you know all about it."

Simon stood looking at her without replying, for each of the pretty creature's arch speeches and every one of her airs and graces seemed to scatter his wits more hopelessly. But when she began to push the heavy oak chair towards the table, he recovered some portion of his self-possession, and darted to her assistance.

"I like this chair," she remarked, following him as he wheeled it forward. "I have tried it and found it comfortable, and I like these curious carvings. This is a strange and most delightful room, Mr. Fleetwood. There are none so pretty at the Hall, and I am very sure our maids do not polish the furniture as yours do. I can see myself in this great table. Pray look, Mr. Fleetwood, how my hands are reflected on this polished surface. And now my face—look! I can see that my hair is very untidy."

She leaned forward smiling at her own reflection and patting a refractory curl into place. If it was coquetry, it was the innocent coquetry of a child. Simon was in no mind to criticise or analyse, and his fascinated eyes wandered from the laughing face bent over the table in such a manner as to display the most delicate little ear in the world and the most exquisite line of throat and shoulder, to the polished board where, indeed, he could discern the reflected gleam of bright eyes and flashing teeth.

Meanwhile Miss Belinda had been fussing in and out

of the room intent on hospitable preparations. She had peremptorily waved away the jug of small beer which Dolly had been prepared to set upon the table. When Miss Charnock of Charnleigh Hall partook of refreshments at the Farm, a dish of tea was the least one could offer her, expensive and rare as that luxury was. Since Sister Fleetwood's death Aunt Binney had had it all her own way with the housekeeping, and preserved the traditions of the "good plain table" kept by her mother and her grandmother before her. But economy was one thing and civility another, and Miss Belinda knew what was due to an honoured guest. Mrs. Fleetwood's best tea-service of Crown Derby china was got out, Miss Belinda's special tea-caddy was unlocked, and four teaspoonfuls were measured out with her own little silver scallop-shell—one for each person and one for the pot, according to the prescribed formula. A honeycomb was added to the dainties of which Rachel had already caught sight, and Miss Belinda, with her own hands, cut bread and butter of egg-shell thinness, to which Miss Rachel did ample justice as well as to everything else on the table, for this goddess of Simon's had the healthy appetite of her sixteen years. She chatted away very amicably while she ate, informing her hostess that she had now returned home for good. She had been at school for five years, and she had paid a long visit to her grandmother in Hungary, and now her education was complete, and she was to go into society, and take her place in the world.

After these explanations she looked pensively round the table, directing her glance particularly towards the glass dish which had already attracted her attention, and which Simon now hastily handed to her.

"I have been wondering what that pretty little shape can be made of," she said, pausing with uplifted spoon. "If it be blackberry, well and good—I like blackberry jelly,

but if it be black currant, then I fear I must content myself with admiring, for I must own that is a dainty I cannot endure—it reminds me too much of coughs and colds. So you see I think it prudent to inquire before I commit myself."

"It is neither one nor the other, Miss Charnock. 'Tis damson cheese, which you must often have tasted, for sure—'tis a favourite dish wi' Lancashire folk."

"Nay, indeed, I never have," cried Rachel, and the hovering spoon descended quickly on the shining little pyramid. "Cheese! A curious name surely. But the preserve, my dear Miss Fleetwood, is excellent. Why do we never have it at the Hall?"

"I wonder indeed that it should be so," said Miss Fleetwood, with the astonishment and concern natural in so experienced a manager. "I fear me the housekeeper yonder must be a thriftless body, if one may make bold to say so. I've heard she comes from London, or somewhere south, and that would account for it; but it is a pity, indeed, madam, with that beautiful damson orchard at the Hall and all. But it is not too late for this year," she added hopefully. "We are nobbut just making ours now."

"Oh, do let me come and see you make it," cried Rachel eagerly, with a spring of delight on her chair. "I should love to of all things. You must know that I am a very great housekeeper. I can make puddings and pies, and jelly, too; though sometimes I cannot help squeezing the bag to make it run through quicker, and then it is not so clear. And I can make an omelette. You see in my mother's country it is thought useful for ladies to know how to do these things, and my grandmother taught me to be very clever in such matters. I dare to say, Miss Fleetwood, that I could even teach you some curious recipes. You have never, I wager,

thought of making hip jam—the hips of roses, you know—but I assure you 'tis excellent. I will teach you how to make hip jam if you will teach me how to make damson cheese. Do you agree?"

Miss Fleetwood had no opinion of hip jam, having never heard of such a condiment in Lancashire, but she readily and delightedly agreed to initiate the young lady into the mysteries of damson cheese making.

"So you see," said Rachel, turning towards Simon, "my inroads are not even confined to the outer fortifications. To-morrow you will find the enemy in the very heart of the fortress—for I take it, the kitchen of an Englishman's house must be that."

CHAPTER VI.

It is my lady; O, it is my love:
O, that she knew she were.

—SHAKESPEARE.

NEXT morning Simon set forth for his usual round, determined not to intrude his company upon the womenkind, great as was the temptation to return before his accustomed hour and see Miss Charnock at work. He had slept little the preceding night, and his broken dreams were haunted by the vision of that white-robed figure which had stood by his hearth and sat at his table. He had forgotten Rachel's very existence till the moment when he had caught sight of her at his own fireside, and the effect produced by her great beauty and charm was enhanced by the fact that her whim made her for the time being a part of his own home circle. She had chosen his mother's place at the table, she had seated herself in his father's chair—countless tender memories of the past wove themselves about her vivid young image—she had taken possession of his heart and mind as completely and suddenly as yesterday she had taken possession of his house. But it was all folly, he said to himself, as he strode along over the golden autumn fields beside hedges brilliant with amber and crimson, and flashing in this early hour with the remains of the heavy dew, that is a forerunner of frost.

"I will think no more of her," he vowed, and marked here amid the thorny twigs, scarlet hips, and wondered idly how those pretty hands of hers would set about

converting the like into jam. Yonder was a crimson leaf, the very colour of the ribbon she wore yesterday, and here was a yellow one that would match her little shoes. No, he would think no more of her, he would certainly not return to interrupt her and force upon her company which might be distasteful. If she condescended to become a pupil of his aunt, she had her own reasons for it. It was not likely that he could teach her anything worth knowing, or amuse her in any way, and for what other reason dared he intrude upon her? So he walked on, more and more rapidly, and started every now and then at the fancied sound of her voice, and peered through the morning mist as though its white folds concealed her lithe young figure. He was very busy and energetic indeed that day, so busy that he finished his round much earlier than usual, and found himself in an extraordinary and unexpected way free to return home. He was justified in doing so on this account, but what about the reasonings with which he had taken such pains to convince himself of the prudence, indeed the necessity, of staying away? He stood stock-still in the middle of the pasture where his morning circuit ended. The horses which had been grazing there surrounded him, one or two special favourites sniffing at him with inquiring velvet noses, evidently expecting a tit-bit or a caress. But Simon was meditating, and did not heed.

"I must go home," he said presently with a sigh.

So home he went with long, swinging strides, and Miss Rachel herself emerged from the kitchen as he entered the hall.

"Come in," she cried, "come in, Mr. Simon, and see how hard we have worked. We have made pounds and pounds of jam. I helped to weigh the fruit and the sugar, and now it is boiling as hard as ever it can, and

to-morrow I am coming to help to press it—may I not Miss Fleetwood? I have been stirring and stirring as hard as any one, and I am so hot and so sticky. My mother is coming to fetch me presently in the phaeton, so now I think it is time to go and clean me—is not that the proper thing to say? Dolly has lent me an apron, for Miss Fleetwood's were not big enough. Now I am going to clean me, Dolly, and you shall have your apron back."

Simon had followed her into the kitchen, and now duly inspected the great copper pans in which the fruit was seething, and the rows and rows of pots which were to be filled on the morrow. Then his eyes reverted to Rachel herself, Rachel with her dress turned back over her shorter frilled petticoat, and Dolly's apron with its great coarse bib pinned across the pretty lace tucker; her cheeks were flushed and her eyes danced, and her hair was ruffled indeed, and there were various tell-tale crimson fruit-stains not only on the apron, but even on her own white arms. One little impudent splash had actually found its way to the rounded chin, just beside the dimple, a fact which old Susan, presently perceiving, made bold to remedy.

"My word, my word!" she cried, approaching the young lady with a napkin, "yo'll carry jam enough away wi' yo', missy, to spread a butty wi'! Coom, let's have this off before Madam comes to fetch yo'."

And Rachel, stooping, actually suffered that bewitching chin to be polished by the audacious old woman, who rubbed with right good will, and, moreover, so great a freedom that Simon with difficulty refrained from interfering. She went upstairs presently with Miss Fleetwood, laughing and chattering all the way, and Simon paced about the hall, having been desired by his aunt to hold himself in readiness to receive Mrs. Charnock. By-and-

bye, however, the shrill tones of his relative summoned him to the upper storey. "Come here, Nephew, and bring the key of the best room; Miss Charnock has a fancy for seeing it."

Simon started and flushed; since his mother's death he had suffered no one but himself to enter her favourite sitting-room. It was, no doubt, a happy omen that Rachel should be the first to seek admittance there: her presence would render it all the more hallowed in his eyes; and yet it was not without a pang that he betook himself to the parlour in search of the key.

As he mounted the stairs his aunt met him, glancing up at him somewhat indignantly, for his face was rather white now and unlike itself.

"Ye needn't think, I'm sure, that I want to set foot yon," she remarked in an angry whisper and with a toss of the head. "I never did, and I never will without it's put back as it should be. But I couldn't refuse the young lady; so I'll just nip down and be on the look-out for Madam, and you can take her in yourself."

Simon brushed past her without speaking, and found Rachel awaiting him in the passage just outside the sitting-room door.

"I hope I'm not giving you a great deal of trouble, Mr. Simon," she said, turning round with a smile; "but I had a mind to see this room. It is associated with so many happy hours."

She wondered a little at his silence and his gravity, but forgot the passing impression in a greater surprise when he had unlocked and thrown open the door, for, though so carefully secured, the room within had all the appearance of being regularly inhabited. The windows were wide open; books and work lay about; Mrs. Fleetwood's couch appeared to have been occupied but recently, for the cushions were piled up as though

waiting to receive her, and the light shawl seemed placed in readiness to cover her feet.

Rachel had uttered a little laughing cry of astonishment as she stepped past Simon but it died upon her lips, and when she turned towards him there were tears in her eyes.

"You have kept it just as it used to be," she said, understanding by a sudden intuition the meaning of the seriousness which had puzzled her, though she could not realise all that was in his mind, nor how much of sweetness mingled with his sadness. "I ought not to have asked you to show it me. Miss Fleetwood told me it was not used now, and I thought it would be perhaps—like any other shut-up room."

"No one comes here except me," said Simon; "but I like to keep it just as it was when she sat here."

"I am afraid it must be very painful to you to show it to a stranger," cried Rachel impulsively. "I did not know—I did not think ——"

She stopped, blushing, and added, after a pause, uplifting her eyes, sweeter to him than ever now that their brightness was dimmed by tears, "I am sure, I beg your pardon".

"I like you to be here," returned he simply. "I can never look on you as a stranger."

"Ah, you remember how often I used to come as a child," cried Rachel. "I loved this room. I used to bring my little stool close to your mother's sofa, and she taught me all sorts of things. See, here are rushes like those she set me to peel—we made such funny little houses with the pith. And do you know, Mr. Simon, that I worked this sampler? I am sure it was not worthy of being framed. But she taught me the stitch, and when it was finished I gave it to her. You see my initials here, R. C.? One on each branch of this very fine tree. Is

it not a fine tree? There are quite seven leaves to it."

They were standing opposite the sampler now. Simon had not known it to be Rachel's handiwork, as it had been presented during his absence from home, and he looked at it with a pleased interest, which was presently succeeded by a vein of deeper emotion. It seemed to him that this quaint relic of her childhood made, as it were, a link between them.

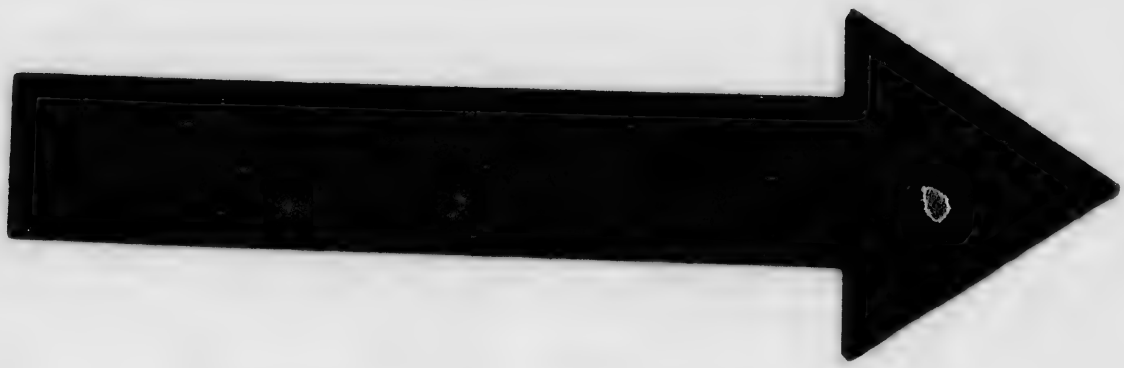
"Do you mind my running on like this?" inquired Rachel shyly, for she marvelled at his taciturnity.

"No, indeed; I like it," he returned; adding, after a short pause, "No one ever speaks of—of old times to me, and I find it sweet."

"I am so glad," exclaimed the girl, "for, do you know, of all things I like talking of old times. Your mother taught me how to make shell-boxes, too—ah, here are the shells in this drawer, just where she always kept them. She had such little dainty fingers, I remember, fit for the work. I suppose she never made jam?" she added, looking at Simon with a curious little pensive air.

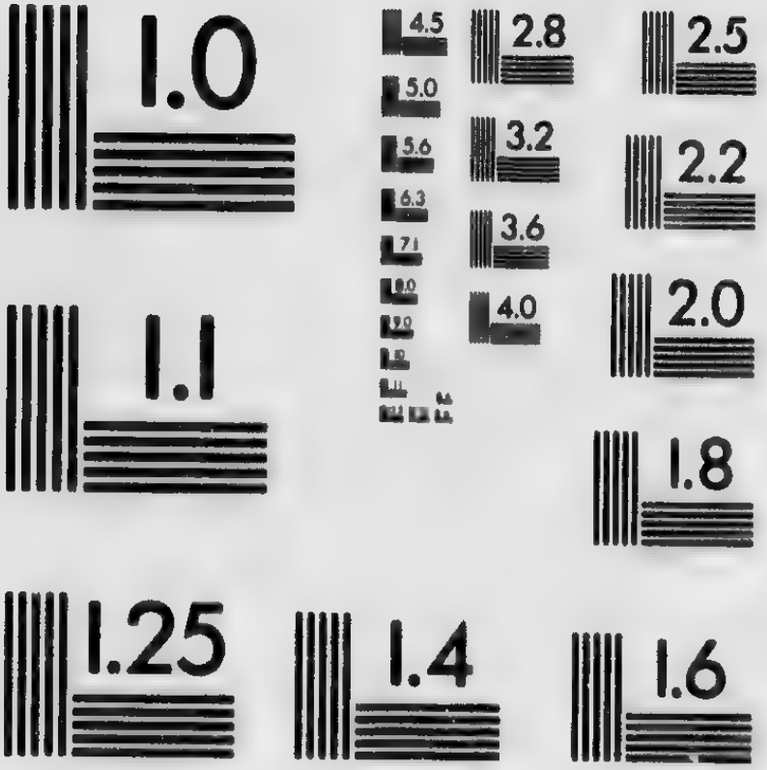
"Oh, no," cried he, almost indignantly, "I cannot imagine her doing anything of the kind—my father would never have allowed it."

"I wonder why," remarked Miss Charnock, still with her head on one side and that thoughtful drawing together of her pretty brows. "I think it is delightful to make jam. My grandmother in Hungary is much, much older than Mrs. Fleetwood was, of course, and very delicate; but she loves all work of the kind. She makes preserves and all sorts of nostrums for the villagers, and she mends the linen with her own beautiful white thin old hands, and she spins—you should see her spin, with all her maids sitting round her. I have learned how to



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spin, and to darn, and to make cakes, too—I think, you know, that women should work as well as men. It is only fair."

Simon gazed at her astonished, not merely at her account of the doings of her grandmother, who was, he had heard, a very great lady in her own country, but that such a theory should be propounded by such lips. It was quite at variance with the views so carefully inculcated by his father.

"I do not agree with you," he said bluntly. "I do not like to see women doing real work, unless compelled by necessity. I think woman's share in the home life should be to attend to its little refinements. I like better to see ladies occupied with such pretty useless trifles as these"—fingering the shell-boxes tenderly—"than roughening their hands and overtaxing their strength by labours for which they are constitutionally unfitted."

"Well, that is an odd speech for a man to make," said Rachel. "I do not think it is flattering to my sex, Mr. Fleetwood. Why should women fritter away their time uselessly when there is so much to be done in the world? And some things, let me tell you, sir, can be managed much better by a woman than by a man."

"I do not doubt it," he said with his quiet smile.

"Do you mean to tell me," she pursued with animation, "that if you were married you would like your wife to leave all the work to you? I think it would be monstrous unfair."

Simon had blushed to the roots of his thick brown hair, and seemed to find it difficult to reply; but after a short pause he said in a low voice: "I should not allow my wife to soil the tips of her fingers if I could prevent it".

"Then you would be doing her an injustice," cried Miss Charnock vehemently, "and if she had any spirit

she would tell you so. I know if I were a farmer's wife," she went on energetically, "I should insist on working shoulder to shoulder with my husband—he without and I within. One should help the other and work for the other; the labours and cares should be as equally divided as the profits and rewards."

She gazed at Simon defiantly, as though challenging contradiction, but to her great astonishment he made no reply whatever. He looked away from her, indeed, with so red a face and so odd an expression that she decided in her own mind that he was very much annoyed at what he perhaps took to be reflections on his mother, and that it would be prudent to change the subject.

She crossed the room to the high mantelpiece, which was quaintly decorated with carvings of grotesque figures, traditionally held to represent Henry VIII. and his six wives. The same daring hand which had adorned the oak panelling of the chamber itself with a coat of paint had tastefully bedecked these representations. The ladies now pranked it with white faces and buff hair, to match the walls, their royal spouse being accorded a variation by way of marking his precedence, for his face was buff and his hair white. Rachel was too well accustomed to the contemplation of these figures to notice them to-day, but her attention was at once attracted by the vases on the shelf above, Simon's last gift to his mother.

"These are new to me," she said. "They are beauties, Mr. Fleetwood; what a lovely shape, and how charmingly the roses are painted! They have lids, too—what is this inside?"

She had taken off one of the covers as she spoke, and now thrust her hands into the fragrant mixture beneath. A sweet faint perfume filled the room, and Rachel, uttering exclamations of delight, continued to stir and

sift the pot-pourri. All at once, struck by the young man's silence, she turned to him, and saw to her surprise that he was leaning against the window-sill, shading his eyes with his hands.

"Oh," she cried, with a little gasp of dismay, "how cruel and thoughtless I have been. Of course your mother made this pot-pourri. Ah, do not think me unfeeling—indeed I did not mean to be so. I—I can't tell you how sorry I am for you."

Simon's eyes were still averted; the delicate odour had in truth brought back to him poignant memories. He was a man of strong emotions and great reserve; his heart though long starved was large and tender, and now was almost too full to allow him to speak. But after a time he found his voice:—

"It was the last thing she made before she died," he said, "and my father —"

He broke off: he could talk of the mother, whom he had yet loved dearly, but of the father, whose loss had been to him more bitter than death, he could not bring himself to speak.

"Ah, your father," murmured Rachel softly, "you lost them both in one day, did you not? Oh, poor Mr. Simon! I do feel for you. To lose your father—that was sad enough, but your mother! I almost wonder you are alive."

Simon turned towards her impetuously; it seemed to him for a moment as though the idolised memory of his father claimed its due. He could not have told any one but her, but she must know how matters really stood, and how the anguish caused by the loss of his mother was as but a drop in the ocean of that other vaster, deeper, all-pervading sorrow for his father's death.

But even as he opened his lips to say the words the

scent of the dried rose-leaves recalled him to that sunny day when he had carried the little mother round the garden; he felt the touch of her hand upon his face, he remembered the look of pride and love in her eyes. Oh no, oh no, for the sake of that day, and in memory of that other when the little head, once pillowed on his shoulder, had been laid to rest on the heart dearer to him than all the world, her memory should be merged in that of the deeper love. Even to his own heart there should be but one sorrow and one tenderness.

He gazed at Rachel in silence, and the look on his face brought tears into her eyes.

They were standing thus, strangely moved, when Madam Charnock appeared in the doorway. She glanced from one to the other in surprise, but recovered herself when Simon came forward to greet her.

Rachel followed her a little silently down the stairs and out of the house, but by-and-bye regained her usual spirits, and began to chat gaily to her mother about her morning's work. Mrs. Charnock answered her cheerfully and pleasantly, and presently inquired casually on what subject she and Simon Fleetwood had chanced to be talking when she had entered.

"Oh, it was about his mother," returned Rachel, grave again in an instant. "Poor fellow! Do you know I believe I inadvertently caused him great pain? First I asked to see Mrs. Fleetwood's sitting-room, which I afterwards found out no one but himself is allowed to enter, and then I took the cover off the jar of pot-pourri which she made just before she died. I believe that young man has an excellent heart. You must have seen how pale he was when you came in, and he looked so sad—ah, how he must have loved his mother! It is not every man that would be so much moved after so many years."

The bright dark eyes of mother and daughter met

each other, the one pair inquiring, the other full of innocent sympathy. Mrs. Charnock sighed. "He has indeed a good heart," she said, and her thoughts, too, went back as Simon's had done to the gathering of the roses, and the memory of the tender relations between mother and son. But the sight of the glow of enthusiasm in Rachel's face recalled her to the present, and to the advisability of prudence.

"He seems a worthy young man," she pursued, "and is, I believe, an excellent farmer. His aunt, too, is a very good sort of person, and not in any way inclined to presume. Still it would be as well not to be too familiar with them, Rachel."

"But why, ma'am?" inquired the girl, opening her eyes very wide. "Miss Fleetwood was most respectful—so respectful indeed that she made me feel quite confused; and I am sure Mr. Simon is respectful too. Nothing could be more so than the few words he spoke to me. He is a very silent man, Mother—I should have called him a little dull but that I believe he has been mightily well educated. Yet, indeed I loved him for thinking so tenderly of his mother. Ah, what should *I* do were I to lose my mother?"

Mrs. Charnock smiled as the child laid her hand impulsively on her arm, and Rachel resumed after a moment or two:—

"To-morrow I am going to finish the damson cheese, and next week I have promised Miss Fleetwood to show her how to preserve hips, though she said—but very respectfully, I assure you, Mother—she thought the preserve would be a gritty sort of thing at best."

Mrs. Charnock glanced at her again sharply, hesitated, and finally changed the conversation. The subject required thought, and must be dealt with tactfully. Rachel was a spoilt child, but such a child. As innocent

as she was impulsive, as frank as she was fearless. It would be a pity even to suggest to her the power of her own attraction and the inconvenient results which might ensue. Left to herself, the notion would probably never occur to her that this stalwart young yeoman might lose his heart to her. In all probability he himself would not dare to be so presumptuous. But after all he had good blood in his veins; he had been educated as a gentleman. Madam Charnock resolved to judge for herself.

CHAPTER VII.

A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
Hath ta'en with equal thanks: and bless'd are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well co-mingled,
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she pleases.

—SHAKESPEARE.

MRS. CHARNOCK herself accompanied her daughter on her next visit to the Farm, much to the surprise and joy of Miss Fleetwood. No one could be more gracious or more charming than the Squire's lady, and to-day her affability was even greater than usual. For not only did she superintend Miss Rachel's operations, but she actually condescended to assist her, and, in her own fair running hand, wrote the name of the preserve on more than three dozen labels. So great was Aunt Binney's rapture over this performance that she could scarcely bring herself to make use of the preserve thus honoured, and for years afterwards the shelves of Simon's store-cupboard were adorned with rows of neat pots which bore the inscription "Damsel Cheese," for such was the foreign Madam's rendering of the title.

As she sat in the cool oak parlour, of which the door was thrown open that Dolly with more ease might go in and out with the trays of pots, she heard a step in the courtyard without, and presently Simon's figure passed the window. Madam Charnock looked at her watch: half-past eleven! It wanted an hour of the Farm dinner-time—what brought him back so soon? She sat motionless, listening with compressed lips. The front

door opened, and his steps sounded in the hall; there came a hesitating pause outside the parlour door, which, opening into the room, concealed the form of the visitor. From the kitchen Rachel's gay young voice rang out of a sudden, and the step passed on. Mrs. Charnock rose and went out into the hall, extending her hand. Simon turned as she crossed the doorway. His face had a curious dreamy look, but he started when he saw her.

"How do you do, Mr. Fleetwood?" she said graciously, as he respectfully took the proffered hand. "You are back early, are you not? You do not dine for an hour yet, I think."

She led the way into the parlour as she spoke, and Simon had no choice but to follow her. He did so in silence, and stood before her, hat in hand, when she had resumed her seat. "You are back early, Mr. Simon," she persisted.

"Yes, madam," he returned, and the blue eyes fell before the dark ones which had been fixed on them with so penetrating a glance.

From the distant kitchen came the sound of Rachel's voice again, and a peal of laughter.

"Listen to that child!" cried Madam, speaking gaily all at once. "I believe she is still as much of a child as on that day, so many years ago, when you found her in the snow. How long ago was it? Let me see—eleven or twelve years, I think."

"It is ten years and nine months, madam," returned Simon, still with eyes cast down.

Madam Charnock could not repress a smile, albeit a somewhat sad one; but she continued in the same light and cheerful tone:—

"Then she must have been between five and six—and a self-willed little monkey she was. She is much the same now, a self-willed, impulsive baby—sadly spoilt,

Mr. Fleetwood. But I do not like to check her too often; I let her have her own way, and follow her own whims—so long as they are harmless. She will learn wisdom soon enough, Heaven knows—let her be happy and foolish while she can."

Simon raised his eyes and looked attentively at the visitor, who was, he knew, speaking to him thus of set purpose. He had turned a little pale, and his face was grave, yet she could not but mark the curious tenderness of its expression. She continued, after a pause, still looking earnestly at him:—

"You understand, and will, therefore, I am sure, excuse the curious freedom with which we have, I may say, taken possession of your house. It is dear to her, as you know, from old association, and besides it is her fancy just now to consider herself a very notable housewife. And so I let her come here, since Miss Fleetwood is so good as to allow her to retain the old footing of her childhood. She will probably continue to pay frequent visits to the Farm, unless I forbid them."

"And why, madam, should these visits be forbidden?" asked young Fleetwood, with dry lips.

The lady paused a moment before replying—"Because, my dear friend, I could not allow my daughter's freak to interfere seriously with the ordinary routine of your house—or of mine. It is not always possible for me to accompany her, and indeed my frequent presence here would doubtless be inconvenient. I know, moreover, that she is as safe here as at home. I need to have no anxiety while she is in your aunt's good care. But it would grieve me much, Mr. Fleetwood, if you were to alter your customary arrangements on her account. I do not wish my daughter to be treated with ceremony—it is, I assure you, quite unnecessary for you to come home at unusual hours in order to attend to her. I—I

should not be able to permit her to repeat her visits if I found them to cause so much disturbance and inconvenience."

She had taken up a pen as she spoke, and now dipped it into the ink as though about to resume her former task. Simon followed the progress of the hand, which shook oddly, and then his eyes reverted to her face.

"I understand, madam," he said very quietly. Then, with a low bow, he went out; and in another minute Mrs. Charnock, glancing through the window, saw him walking rapidly away. All the time they had been speaking they could hear Rachel chattering and laughing, but she never discovered that Simon had been near the house that day. The damson cheese was made and stored, and the hip preserve was in progress, when, one morning soon after breakfast, Mrs. Charnock was told that Simon Fleetwood wished to see her. The Squire had ridden out, and Rachel had betaken herself to the Farm, so Madam sat all alone in her morning-room with a great pile of bills and papers before her. Her face had been anxious enough as she pored over them, but it looked doubly anxious now, when, at her desire, the servant ushered the young yeoman into the room. Her vague alarm and distress, however, turned into momentary terror as she caught sight of his face. She rose hastily from her chair, crying, "Has anything happened? Good God! my daughter!"

"I have not seen your daughter, madam, and to the best of my belief nothing has happened. I have come to speak to you—about myself."

She seated herself with a sigh of relief, and motioned to Simon to do the same, but he declared that he would rather stand. During the pause which followed Mrs. Charnock turned a little pale. She had been reassured on her daughter's account, and yet, as she gazed at

Simon, she was conscious of something that was very like fear. He held his hat in his hand, and she noticed the nervous grip of the strong brown fingers. Lifting her eyes almost timidly to his face, she saw that his colour came and went, and that he was evidently struggling with some overpowering emotion. The tall, commanding presence, a sudden recognition of the strength of the man's nature, the consciousness of the fierceness of that silent battle, combined to o'erawe her. She leaned back in her chair, dropping her eyes again, and waited with bated breath till he should speak. All at once he made a step nearer to the table, and, thrusting his hand into his bosom, drew forth a lace-edged handkerchief.

He laid it on the table without a word. She took it up, gazing inquiringly at him, her courage returning now that he had begun to take action. "It is my daughter's," she said, with a little laugh that grated on her own ears. "She lost it some days ago."

"Yes," returned Simon, "I found it."

"Well, it is very good of you to bring it to me," quoth Madam, smiling with a quivering lip.

"I found it three days ago," said Simon, speaking steadily and deliberately, "and I have carried it about with me ever since. It has lain against my bosom night and day."

She looked at him now, her colour rising and her eyes flashing.

"I came to speak to you about it," he went on, keeping his eyes unflinchingly on hers. "It seemed to me right that you should know. I have the misfortune to love your daughter, and to-day I made up my mind to come and tell you so."

The lady stood up and faced him, the pride of race asserting itself, every instinct and tradition of her line

rushing to reinforce her outraged dignity; but Yeoman Fleetwood held his ground, dominating all by the mere force of his personality.

"I have kept my word to you," he went on. "When she was in the house, I have gone out—I have remained away; but every time that she comes my love grows stronger. I can feel her presence in the place, I can think over the prattle which I may not hear, I picture her sitting by my hearth, busy about the house —"

"Simon Fleetwood," said Madam Charnock, rallying her self-possession and speaking with grave, cold severity, "have you come here to-day to insult me by making an offer of marriage for my daughter?"

"An offer of marriage!" he cried stammering, unnerved, it would seem, by the very words; but in a moment he recovered himself.

"No, indeed, madam, I have no hope. I came here to tell you what I felt—to own what seems to you an outrage. Yet, before God, madam, my love for Miss Charnock need be held as no disgrace to her. I look upon her as a man may look upon the stars in Heaven."

Mrs. Charnock was astonished, bewildered, confounded; mastered by the passion of the man, yet filled with an overwhelming pity. Leaving her place she came towards him, and laid her hand kindly on his arm.

"Sit down, Simon," she said tremulously, "sit down, my poor lad. All this is very painful, and I do not understand. If you see for yourself—if you know that this sudden attachment of yours is hopeless, why have you come here to confess it to me?"

He had changed countenance at her altered tone, and now sat down beside her as she desired; of the two she seemed the most moved.

"You bade me think of her as a child," he said, "and

I bound myself to keep away from her. Madam, I find it impossible to do either the one or the other. It is madness, as you say, but I think of her as a woman. I have not crossed my threshold when she was within, but I feel that now I must ask you to give me back my promise. From the pasture this morning I caught sight of her standing at my door, and my feet began to take me towards her. It was not until I had thrown myself face downwards beneath the hedge, rallying my will in remembrance of your words, that I could stop myself. You must keep us farther apart. The time has come for you to forbid her visits to my house."

"And this is what you have come to say?" murmured Madam Charnock, and Simon, all absorbed in his own passion and his own misery, wondered vaguely why those soft eyes of hers had become so dim. There was a pause, and then she said quietly,—

"I thank you, Simon. I will follow your advice."

He rose, and bowing, walked unsteadily towards the door. But before he reached it she called him by his name. "Simon! Give me your hand, Simon. In all my life I have never met so honourable a man."

And then, with a little pettish cry: "Ah, Simon, why did not your mother marry one of her own degree!"

He paused with his hand upon the latch.

"Not even for the hope of being nearer to her could I wish my father other than he was," he said, and he went away holding his head high.

CHAPTER VIII.

Content thee, gentle coz, let him alone,
He bears him like a portly gentleman

. . . . . .

My only love sprung from my only hate,
Too early seen unknown, and known too late.

—SHAKESPEARE.

WHAT excuse Madam Charnock made to her daughter, or in what manner she managed to divert her attention from the accumulation of household knowledge never transpired, but Rachel came no more to the Farm. Miss Belinda marvelled much, and grumbled not a little. It was the way with young creatur's she said. They'd take up a thing that eager, and seem to be that set on it, and then without rhyme or reason they'd give over caring for it. Talk about fine ladies' housekeeping—she knew what that meant, and she need look no farther nor Simon's own mother. Never would Miss Binney forget how set she seemed on getting the keys off her when first she came to the place—not indeed that Miss Binney wanted to keep them when her brother brought a new mistress to the Farm. Hadn't she been there waiting on the threshold when the bride and bridegroom came home, and had she not handed over the keys almost before the new Mrs. Fleetwood could set foot to the ground? Ha! but when the fine madam had heard that the keeping of the keys entailed being astir at five o'clock in the morning to see after things in the dairy and storeroom, she had very soon handed them back to them as—when all was said and done—had the best

right to them—them as was born and bred on the place, and knew how things ought to be managed.

At this point of Miss Belinda's monologue Simon generally walked away. He made no comment on the sudden cessation of Rachel's visits—indeed he had recently become more silent than ever.

"Lord!" exclaimed his aunt in exasperation one day, "I do declare, Simon Fleetwood, a body might as well sit down opposite a statue or a mummy, or some such thing; there's no getting a word out of you. What are you thinking about so hard? Are you busier than usual?"

"No, not more so than usual."

"You're on your feet from morning to night—before morning most days. Why do ye do it, then, if there's no occasion for it? All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, they say, and it's true enough. Eh, Simon, you're getting terrible dull. Why don't ye take a holiday?"

"A farmer has no business to take holidays," replied her nephew.

"Pooh, nonsense!" ejaculated Miss Binney, rubbing her nose according to her custom when annoyed. "I am sure there's not many folks as independent as you, and none, I'll wager, who could afford a little pleasurin' better. You always used to hunt—and so did your father—just the same as the gentry."

"Aunt Binney," said Simon with an odd look, "you have often told me that some day I should get sense. Supposing I have got sense now—supposing I understand that there is no use in doing what gentry do because I am not a gentleman?"

"You always did hunt, then," she grumbled, unconvinced, "and as for that I don't see why a farmer hasn't as good a right to see a fox killed as any other."

"Certainly, my dear Aunt, if he can spare the time."

"Time, time! You're talkin' real foolish, Simon. It's my belief that you're trying to tire yourself out."

Simon received this remark, according to his wont when hard pressed, in silence; but the old lady's chance shot had hit the mark. He was, indeed, trying to tire himself out, seeking in ceaseless bodily activity an outlet for his restlessness. He had resolved to conquer the sudden mad passion which had so unaccountably taken possession of him; as he had confessed to Madam Charnock, he was thoroughly convinced of its hopelessness, and he was now determined to give it no place in his thoughts—to stifle it, to starve it out.

So from early dawn till late at night he toiled like any of his labourers, being astir, indeed, long before they, and once or twice surprising them by rubbing down one of his horses, or putting his own hands to the plough. They considered such things unnecessary and undignified, and yet they could not but admire the manner in which he set to work.

"Ye might ha' been born to it, Mester Simon," cried old Bill, one day, with unwilling rapture. "Yon's as straight a drill as I could mak' mysel'."

"I have been born to it, Bill," returned Simon; and he went on up the field again, turning at the top in masterly style, conscious the while of a sense of odd satisfaction as his feet sank into the cool, damp earth, and his eye marked out the line wherein the horses were to travel.

So the winter wore away. Simon grew thinner and graver as the months passed. He thought he had conquered himself, and yet, when the spring came and the earth began to shoot and bud, and the trees to bloom, and the birds to sing, his pain returned, and, struggle as he might, he could not crush or strangle the

mad hankering after the impossible which seemed to gather new strength from the growing life about him.

One day he was working in a corner of the orchard that bordered a certain bridle-path that led past his house. There had been a long spell of dry weather, and the duck-pond in this corner had sunk low; his great white flock of Aylesburys were wandering disconsolately round it, or dabbling in desultory fashion in the muddy water, which was too shallow to admit of their swimming in it. The ground was hard, and the deepening of this little pond was in consequence a work of no small difficulty; but Simon was tender to all live things depending on him, and, moreover, well pleased at an undertaking which involved real toil and exertion. He worked vigorously with pick and spade, and had almost completed his task when he was of a sudden hailed by a voice which seemed to make his very heart stand still.

"Mr. Fleetwood!" cried Rachel Charnock. "Pray come hither, Mr. Fleetwood. Here are some friends to whom I am anxious to introduce you."

The laughing face peered at him through the young green of the hedge; she was on horseback, and wore a most becoming riding-habit of powder-blue cloth, and a wide-brimmed, black hat with drooping feathers; to Simon's dazzled eyes she had never appeared so lovely. Quite a little company of riders had halted with her, but he at first could notice none but her. He stood gazing at her, his head, now that he held himself erect, high among the pink and white blossom of a gnarled apple tree. He had taken off hat and coat, his waistcoat was unbuttoned, his shirt open at the throat; yet one who sat beside Miss Charnock thought, as she cast her eyes upon this stalwart yeoman, that she had never beheld so goodly a man.

"Come hither, Mr. Simon," cried Rachel, raising herself in the saddle and beckoning; and then Simon, returning to himself with a start, threw down his spade, drew on his coat, and hastened across the orchard. Over the young, silky grass with swinging strides, stooping his head beneath the blossom-laden boughs, on he came through dappled sun and shade, until at length, leaping the hedge, he stood beside Miss Charnock. As he sprang into the lane the lady who rode at Rachel's side backed her horse a little and turned her face away, whether through pride or shyness Simon did not care to hazard, for indeed he had no eyes for her, or any one but Rachel. Two young gentlemen had reined up a little to the rear, and Miss Charnock turned gaily to the foremost.

"Come, let me make you acquainted one with the other," she cried. "Whom do you think, Mr. Simon, I have called you to see? You might guess, and guess, and guess again, and yet you would never hit upon the truth. Why, you must know that these friends of mine are your own cousins; yes, and very near ones, too; their mother and your mother were sisters. Mr. Simon Fleetwood, this is Miss Bertha Gifford, and this is Mr. Edward Gifford. Now I beg that you will shake hands. I am told there has been a family feud, but I don't like feuds, so I have made up my mind that this one shall cease. I only found out last night that Mrs. Gifford had been a Weston of Hatherleigh, and then I knew you must be cousins."

The bright eyes were glancing from one to the other as she spoke; the Giffords were silent and seemed constrained, and of that she made small account; but her heart misgave her for a moment when she noticed how pale and stern was Simon Fleetwood. She looked at him now almost pleadingly: "Indeed, I think that

cousins should be good friends," she said, adding with a laugh, "I ought to know, for I have a cousin of my own. What say you, Humphrey?"

Simon followed her glance, and started as he recognised that the fourth member of the party was no other than Mr. Humphrey Charnock, who had made no attempt to greet him, but sat motionless on his horse. He answered now with a sneer, which did not escape the onlookers:—

"If all cousins were such pleasant and desirable acquaintances as yourself, my dear Rachel, we should be eager to hunt up our kin to the ninetieth degree, but as it is, I fear me that most cousins—first or otherwise—love each other no whit the more than the first brothers we are told about."

"That is a very silly speech," retorted Rachel, colouring. "My friends here will form but a poor opinion of your taste and judgment."

"I think the comparison a little far-fetched, I must own," cried Edward Gifford. "But if it comes to that, we are all cousins, through Adam the Gardener, and so at your bidding, madam, I will acknowledge my kinship to this worthy young man, who is, indeed, apparently in the same way of business as the head of the family. Shake hands, Cousin Simon, if Simon be your name. 'Tis a monstrous good name for a yeoman, egad!"

Simon took the proffered hand somewhat stiffly, for besides his natural resentment at the young man's tone, and the contemptuous glance which he had cast upon his own somewhat disordered dress and earth-stained fingers, he could not forget the cruel usage to which his mother had been subjected by her own people. But his face changed as he turned to greet Miss Gifford, who now pressed forward with unexpected eagerness, and stretched out a friendly little hand.

"Indeed, Cousin," she said with a certain timid graciousness, "I am very glad to know you, and I—I—hope that all painful memories may be set aside."

As Simon's eyes met hers their expression changed to one of startled tenderness, for it seemed to him that the young mother whose beauty had so often called forth his childish admiration was once more before him. He took her hand and pressed it gently. He was too much moved to speak, but Bertha Gifford carried away with her the memory of the look which he bent upon her face. No one had ever gazed at her thus before, and the impression already produced by the strange personality of this new cousin of hers was strengthened to an extraordinary degree. Rachel, too, marked the look and the emotion evinced both by Simon and her friend, and drew her own conclusions. She conducted her party homewards somewhat silently, for she was revolving a project in her mind; and Bertha Gifford responded but absently to Humphrey Charnock, who rode beside her, and who, finding his sallies disregarded, presently lapsed into gloom. When they reached the Hall, Rachel eagerly sought Mrs. Charnock, whom, to her great joy, she found alone in her dressing-room. "You can have no idea, my dear Mother," she cried, "what an extraordinary event has taken place. It is most wonderful and delightful and romantic, and I have brought it all about by my own cleverness. Oh, you would never guess, so I must tell you. You must know that when I heard Gifford last night pompously announcing that his mother had been a Miss Weston of Hatherleigh, I immediately bethought me of our poor Simon Fleetwood ——"

"Why, to be sure," interrupted Mrs. Charnock, "these people must be cousins of Simon's. I hope they may not find it out, for I think a meeting could not but be painful and mortifying to all parties."

Rachel's face fell; she pulled off her fine hat and threw it pettishly on the table.

"Pray do not say that, ma'am," she exclaimed after a moment's hesitation, "for I have but now been at the pains to introduce the cousins to each other. Nay, do but listen, Mother," as Mrs. Charnock, in real vexation, was about to interrupt. "When we rode out this morning, Mr. Gifford chose to be my escort, while Humphrey attached himself to Bertha. I dislike Mr. Gifford, ma'am, and he talked a vast deal of nonsense, and boasted so much of his family and his wealth that I longed to humble him. So I began to relate how I knew some of his connections, and set to work to sing Simon's praises, first in joke, and then in earnest; for, I confess, I soon became ashamed of my original motive, and longed to do poor Mr. Fleetwood a good turn."

"I doubt, Rachel, if young Fleetwood would consider this a service; you know he is very proud ——"

"Ah, you will hear, you will hear," broke in Rachel, mysteriously nodding her head. "Well, to proceed with my story. Young Gifford was first astonished and then interested, and when I told him what a most perfect gentleman Simon really was, how well educated and refined, and added that he was a very old friend of mine, I could see that he was more and more impressed. I had intended to convey my party to the Farm, but lo and behold! no sooner had I convinced Mr. Gifford of the high attainments of Fleetwood, his renown as a scholar, and his position in society—I am afraid I coloured the picture a little highly in my zeal—than I suddenly caught sight of Simon himself, working in his own orchard.

"Working, Rachel?"

"Yes, ma'am, digging. He had neither hat nor coat, and his hair was rumpled, and his shirt-sleeves rolled up

on his great brown arms—he looked a proper man, Mother—the very picture of a handsome rustic—but you should have seen Mr. Gifford's face when I pointed out his cousin."

"Well, my dear child, I cannot say you did wisely. You certainly chose a most inopportune moment."

"Mother, I was determined to clinch the matter there and then, so I called out to Bertha to rein up her horse, for I had a delightful surprise for her. 'You must know that a kinsman of yours lives here,' said I, 'your first cousin, Mr. Simon Fleetwood. I mean to introduce him to you, and hope that you will be good friends, for there is no man in this neighbourhood whom I esteem and respect more.' And with that, while Cousin Humphrey was frowning and cursing under his breath, and Bertha was puckering up her brows and staring at me—for doubtless she had heard the story of her poor aunt's disgrace—I called to Simon Fleetwood with all my might, and in two minutes he was standing beside us in the lane. Ah, you should have seen Edward Gifford's face as he took poor Fleetwood's earthy hand! I laughed in my sleeve, you may think, until I chanced to look at Simon, and then I saw it was no laughing matter. He shook hands because I told him, but at heart he was not reconciled."

Mrs. Charnock glanced at her with quick, puzzled anxiety. Rachel had become serious for a moment, but presently laughed again gleefully. "But the cream of the matter is to come," she cried. "After I had said what I could to smooth matters over between Simon and Mr. Gifford, I presented him to Bertha—and then what do you think happened, Mother? Bertha and Simon Fleetwood fell in love with each other at first sight. Now, is not that a delightful climax? Is not that the very best possible way in which the feud could

come to an end? Bertha is her own mistress, you know; so she and Simon can marry, and Simon can take his proper place in the world, and we shall have dear, pretty Bertha for a neighbour."

Mrs. Charnock gazed at her, first with astonishment, then with amusement, finally her face assumed an expression of relief. She fell to laughing all at once, almost unrestrainedly, and Rachel, who had laughed, too, to begin with, became presently aggrieved and piqued.

"My dear love," said her mother, as soon as she could speak, "this is a very pretty tale indeed, but you must own that it is most unlikely. I question, to begin with, whether Bertha's admiration for her cousin can be so great as you suppose, particularly as, according to your account, he did not appear to the best advantage."

"On the contrary, ma'am, I vow I have never seen him look so well. He looked like some young god of the woods as he came striding across the orchard; and when he turned to Bertha, I swear his face was beautiful. And she—she coloured up, and her eyes shone—'twas the prettiest sight. I assure you, Mother, it is a real romance."

Still Mrs. Charnock seemed incredulous. "It is possible that what you say of Bertha may be true, but are you quite sure about Fleetwood?"

Rachel pouted. "Really, ma'am, you take me for a child," she cried with all the outraged dignity of her seventeen years. "One would think I had no scent for romance, and I flatter myself I have a particularly keen one. Pray, was I not the first to detect that Joe the carter was courting Sally Lupton, our dairymaid?"

Mrs. Charnock laughed again. "Indeed you showed great penetration on that occasion," she said. "If I remember aright you saw them embracing in the lane.

Well, well, doubtless you are of an age that may be supposed to understand matters of sentiment; but what you tell me of Simon Fleetwood surprises me."

"And now," said Rachel coaxingly, "the next thing to be thought of is how best to further the affair. You see they have not yet got beyond looking at each other with tenderness. They must meet. Do you not think, considering the relationship, one might overlook the fact that poor Simon is not precisely in society, and invite him to dinner? Really and truly and seriously, my dear Mother, I do not see why it should not be done. Simon is better born and better bred than many of those who are admitted to our table. If truth be told, I believe he is better born than the Giffords, for old Mr. Gifford, the father, made his money by banking or brewing, or in some such fashion, and I am sure they know nothing about their grandfather, while the Fleetwoods have been established at the Farm for generations. Do pray let us have Fleetwood to dinner.

Mrs. Charnock considered a little. Much of her daughter's reasoning was indisputable, and she felt, moreover, a real interest in Simon himself, a desire for his well-being strongly dashed with remorse. Her own daughter's whim, which she herself had been foolish enough to abet, had caused him to suffer in the past; here, perhaps, was an opportunity of making amends. She was angry with herself for being conscious of a certain lurking sense of disappointment that the young man should be so fickle; and yet, surely it would be the height of unreasonableness to expect him to waste his life in an attachment which she herself had been the first to discountenance. After a long pause she consented to accede to Rachel's request, adding, however, that she deemed it highly probable the yeoman would decline it.

CHAPTER IX.

A lover and a lusty bachelor,
With lockés crull, as they were laid in press,
Of twenty years of age he was, I guess.
Of his statûre, he was of even length,
And wonderly deliver and great of strength.

—CHAUCER.

TRUE to Mrs. Charnock's prophecy, Simon wrote a courteous but firm refusal to her invitation, but expressed his intention of waiting upon Mr. and Miss Gifford at an early date. Rachel was chagrined, and inclined to be indignant with the yeoman for not at once seizing the opportunity which she had been kind enough to afford him; but her mother declared that he had acted with dignity and good sense.

When, a morning or two later, Simon rode up according to his promise to pay his respects to the visitors at the Hall, by a curious chance Rachel and Mr. Gifford had ridden out with the Squire and Humphrey, and only Miss Gifford and Madam Charnock were at home to receive him; or rather, to be accurate, Bertha Gifford received him alone, for she happened to be strolling about the lawn when Simon appeared, and though Madam witnessed his arrival from the window of the breakfast-room, she forbore to join them. Actuated either by curiosity or by the good-natured desire to forward Rachel's romance, she sat still in her arm-chair beside the window, and save for an occasional glance in the direction of the young people, she cannot be said to have done her duty as a chaperon. She took note of

Bertha's start when Simon rode up; he bestrode a beautiful thoroughbred horse, and was himself looking his best. At sight of his cousin he dismounted, and passing his arm through the reins advanced to meet her. Mrs. Charnock could not but observe the grace and dignity of his carriage and demeanour. No young lordling could have comported himself more becomingly. She heaved a little impatient sigh as she meditated on the absurd social distinctions which debarred her from admitting him to more intimate relations with her family. *Noblesse oblige*, she said to herself; the Squire's only daughter, the descendant on Madam Charnock's own side of an almost princely line, could not be suffered to contract a *mésalliance*. It was a comfort, she told herself, that the girl had shown no inclination for him; if Rachel's surmise were correct, and if the attachment she suspected terminated in a marriage between the cousins, why, then of course all danger ceased to exist, and Simon must be admitted within their circle of friends. Why was it that the prospect seemed to afford Mrs. Charnock so little satisfaction?

Simon and Bertha meanwhile were standing side by side on the smooth lawn, the horse occasionally fidgeting, and being soothed by a touch of his master's hand: even in her concern about more important matters, Mrs. Charnock noticed the good understanding which evidently existed between man and beast.

Bertha's face was flushed, and she was talking with eager animation, and Simon—yes, Simon was listening attentively, bending upon her a gaze of tender interest and concern. The onlooker tapped her foot on the floor and frowned. Pooh! men were all alike! But she had given this man credit for greater fidelity, greater strength of character—better taste, she might have added, for, indeed, she marvelled how he could find eyes for

the insignificant prettiness of Bertha Gifford when her daughter was near. However, all was no doubt as it should be; Rachel was right, it seemed, and Mrs. Charnock tried to think she was very glad.

Yet, if she had but known it, the expression which vexed her on Simon's face was in reality called forth not by Bertha, but by Rachel; for it chanced that this new-found kinswoman of Yeoman Fleetwood's was dilating to him on the admirable manner in which her friend Miss Charnock had set to work to end the estrangement between them.

"I cannot tell you, Cousin Fleetwood," she said, "how much I love that girl. She is so generous, so simple-minded, and she has so much strength of character. Was it not good of her to be anxious to make peace between us? For naturally our family differences can be no concern of hers. But as she says, cousins should be good friends—I trust that you agree with her, for I myself detest to be at enmity with any one."

"Indeed," returned Simon, "it would be hard for any one to be at enmity with you." His smile was all for her this time, and, if less tender, was full of kindness. Pretty Bertha blushed more than ever, and feeling a little confused reverted to the former topic with even more animation than she had previously displayed. Little did she know how wise she was in her choice of a subject: while she spoke of Rachel the yeoman was constrained to remain by her side. It was not until she began to apologise for her brother's absence and to request Simon, with gentle insistence, to send away his horse, and to await Mr. Gifford's return, that he was recalled to himself.

"Unfortunately, I cannot stay," he said, a little coldly, "I have already kept you standing too long. Pray, forgive me."

He stretched out his hand, and poor little Bertha hesitatingly took it.

"But will you not at least come in for some refreshment?" she said, almost piteously. "I feel sure Mrs. Charnock would wish——"

"We farmers dine early, you know," replied Simon. "It must be close upon the time now. No, thank you, I will not intrude upon Mrs. Charnock. I must say good-bye. Pray, express to your brother my regret at not finding him at home."

In another moment or two he was gone, and Mrs. Charnock sighed again as she watched Bertha look after him with a very pensive face.

Great was Rachel's annoyance at the discovery that Simon had been so ill-advised as to call upon Mr. Gifford during that gentleman's absence.

"I had set my heart upon being present at their first interview," she said. "I should have kept the peace between them, and made sure the reconciliation was complete. Now I must see that Gifford returns the visit soon and behaves properly. I believe," she added, seriously, "this young man would do a great deal to oblige me."

"Indeed? That is strange, my dear, for he does not seem to me by any means a good-natured person."

As Mrs. Charnock spoke she cast a keen glance at her daughter, but Rachel bore the look without flinching, and continued to drum absently on the table.

"It is certainly rather singular," she agreed, "for Cousin Humphrey, who is much more agreeable, will do nothing at all that I ask him, and yet he is a relation. But Mr. Gifford is a droll creature—he says such curious things."

"Pray, what manner of things, child?"

"Oh, I don't know—silly things—and he does silly

things, too. Yesterday, for instance, he picked up an old flower that I had thrown away, and wore it all day, though I told him he was free to pick himself a really pretty posy in the garden; and to-day, when my father, as we rode home, asked him to grant him half an hour's chat in the study this afternoon, he grimaced at me and replied that he should be delighted; and presently falling behind he remarked that there was nothing he would not do for my *beaux yeux*. Now, I had not asked him to converse with my father, and I am sure I do not care whether he does or no, and I think it was silly of him to say that ——"

She paused abruptly, struck by the expression of her mother's face; Mrs. Charnock looked startled and alarmed.

"Rachel, I have heard nothing of this," she said. "What can your father have to say to Mr. Gifford?"

"Truly I do not know, ma'am; and what have my eyes to do with it?"

Her mother looked at her seriously and a little sadly, but she smiled as she replied:—

"My love, it is possible that Gifford may admire them—young men do occasionally admire a girl's eyes—and it is quite possible that he entertains for you feelings that you have not hitherto suspected. My little Rachel, I have been glad to think that you are a complete child still, in spite of your seventeen years. But other people may not think so; other people may realise what is indeed the truth—that you are of marriageable age."

Rachel opened her great eyes very wide: "Oh, ma'am, I hope that Mr. Gifford does not think anything about that, for I am sure I do not want to marry him. I do not want to marry any one at present. Later on, perhaps, when I am quite grown-up, I dare say I shall

take a husband, for I don't want to be an old maid, of course. But it shall not be any one like Mr. Gifford."

"And pray what manner of man must he be?" inquired the mother, laughing outright, and much relieved to find that it was needless to continue at present the process of enlightenment which she had always dreaded.

"Oh, I don't know; I think I should like him to be a Prime Minister—or if there is'nt a single Prime Minister handy when I am ready to marry, I may perhaps put up with a Duke. But he shall be a great man; of that I am determined."

"So?" said Mrs. Charnock softly, and thought within herself, that, after all, it was as well for poor Simon's own sake that she had from the outset made clear to him how hopeless was his attachment to her daughter. Presently, however, she forgot her interest in Yeoman Fleetwood's love affairs, past and present, in her anxiety as to her husband's motive for seeking a private conversation with this young Gifford, whom, to say the truth, she liked as little as her daughter.

After her mother's hint, Rachel avoided Mr. Gifford's company as much as possible, and only conversed with him when absolutely obliged. This treatment, however, far from repelling the young man, served but to inflame his ardour, and his devotion to the girl became apparent to every one in the house. Humphrey Charnock, meanwhile, was paying languid court to Bertha Gifford; his fortunes having now reached the stage when they required repairing by a prudent marriage. Bertha had plenty of money, a sufficiency of good looks, no father to make inconvenient inquiries, but rather a most accommodating brother. Humphrey decided that she would do very well, and had, in fact, introduced the Giffords to his uncle's family that he might the more easily press his suit; for though Bertha's wits were not of the sharpest,

they were still sufficiently keen to enable her to perceive the advantage of an alliance with the heir to such a property as Charnleigh. So Humphrey wooed in a very quiet and unobtrusive fashion, feeling occasionally bored, but always absolutely secure of the prize; and Bertha timidly accepted such attentions as he was good enough to offer her, without in the least realising their motive, being, indeed, wholly occupied with the thought of her cousin Simon.

One morning, a few days after Fleetwood's visit, Bertha had proposed that her brother should return the call, adding that for her part she thought herself bound in common civility to pay her respects to his aunt. Rachel, who was present, warmly seconded the proposal, evincing so much anxiety, and speaking with so much animation, that Gifford protested his readiness to journey to the world's end if such were her pleasure.

Humphrey somewhat stiffly observed that he failed to see the necessity of Miss Gifford's wasting her time on such an errand. since the relationship did not extend to good old Belinda Fleetwood, and there could in consequence be no motive for Bertha thus lowering herself. Seeing that she maintained a blushing silence, he added in a lower and more gentle tone:—

"I feel sure that you will give up the plan at my request. Believe me, it distresses me to think of your being in such company."

To his surprise, however, Bertha received his petition in mute, but absolutely fixed obstinacy, and presently went out of the room to prepare for the visit.

CHAPTER X.

He sins no sin but gentle drunkenness. . . .
—OMAR KHAYYÁM.

DOLLY, the cherry-cheeked little maid at the Farm, appeared in answer to Mr. Gifford's summons, and stared round-eyed at the fine visitors. The master was up yonder at the barn looking after the threshing; he would be in directly. Miss Fleetwood was at home, but Dolly reckoned she was busy. Nevertheless, she would fetch her in a two-three minutes. Then, raising her voice in a shrill summons of "Bill, Bill," Dolly clung to the bridle of either horse with a stout red hand, and, jerking her head over her shoulder, requested the callers to walk in.

"The owd lad will be here afore aught's long," she explained, "an' I'll just bide wi' th' 'osses till he cooms. If ye'll walk straight in, ma'am—first door to the reet."

Bertha obeyed her injunctions, and Edward followed, sniggering to himself. Out of the bright sunshine and the tingling air of the north country spring they made their way into the large, wide, quiet parlour. Here it was cool, not to say cold, for the first of April was past and fires were tabooed. Moreover, two of the mullioned windows were set open. Edward shivered, but looked about him curiously.

"Not a bad room," he said. "I wish the fellow would come. Ugh, how cold it is! I must have a nip of something to warm me. I'll engage this fellow brews better ale than is to be had at the Hall, but for

the matter of that a glass of Cognac would be the thing to warm one best in this ice-house."

"Pray, Brother ——" Bertha was beginning anxiously, when a quick step was heard in the hall without and Simon entered. Edward advanced to meet him with exaggerated heartiness, which he maintained in spite of Fleetwood's somewhat formal greeting. Simon could feel no touch of resentment towards Bertha, but the mere sight of Edward seemed somehow to conjure up afresh the memory of his mother's wrongs. Still, Rachel Charnock wished them to be friends—whatever might be the motive, the wish must be respected.

Bertha now came forward, and his face changed. His response to her salutation left nothing to be desired in the way of cordiality, and Edward Gifford, quick to mark the difference, gazed in some wonder from one to the other. Bertha's blue eyes were alight; she stammered as she spoke, and her colour came and went; and Simon, thinking to himself in his simplicity that he had never seen so shy a girl, did his best to set her at ease. His aunt would be down immediately, he told her; he had sent for her.

"But Saturday is a very busy day with us, you know," he added, smiling. "She will, I fancy, require a little time to get ready."

Meanwhile Gifford, sauntering to the window at the farther end of the room, which looked out into some back premises, became the amused observer of a curious little scene which was there enacted. First came Dolly, tripping over the cobble stones and shouting lustily for "Missus". In answer to her summons an old lady presently appeared—an old lady who wore pattens and a huge apron; whose sleeves were rolled up high on a pair of stout arms, and whose black cap was set awry on her sparse grey hair. In one hand this lady carried a milk-

pan, which she was critically inspecting, and to which she was apparently inviting Dolly's attention. It was with evident difficulty that the latter succeeded in notifying to her the arrival of distinguished company, but presently the fact was grasped, and consternation ensued. The pan was thrust into Dolly's hand, and the pattens went clattering over the stones at astonishing speed. Gifford turned away from the window with a yawn as the portly figure vanished; the old body would take ages to attire herself, and meanwhile he was cold and thirsty. He was constantly thirsty, and indeed the one drawback to his comfort at Charnleigh Hall was the inability to quench that thirst with the frequency to which he was accustomed. He had often seen Madam Charnock's eyes fixed on him with a searching and curiously disapproving gaze. He felt that she watched him, and also, in some indefinable way, that she disliked him, and would be quick to take advantage of any slip on his part. Moreover, though he had excellent reasons for considering that it would be to the Squire's advantage to keep on good terms with him, he never felt thoroughly sure of that gentleman, and his infatuation for Rachel was such that he would not risk a quarrel with him until a certain compact that he knew of was actually signed and sealed. But he was getting very tired of the enforced abstinence, and was glad to think the necessity for precaution would soon be over. And here, at least, he need not be too punctilious.

"It's confounded cold, Cousin Fleetwood," he remarked, advancing into the room and buttoning up his coat. "Do you always keep the windows open here?"

Simon, who had been sitting beside Bertha, rose quickly and apologised.

"We are too busy to sit much in this room in the morning," he said. "I am generally out, and my aunt

is occupied in the house, so the windows usually stay open from breakfast till dinner."

"You dine early, don't you," cried Edward, "and mighty sensible, too. They keep monstrous late hours at the Hall; a man may be starved or parched with thirst, and yet often they will not sit down before six o'clock. I must own I like the notion of a good meal in the middle of the day."

"Then will you stay and share ours?" inquired Simon, courteously. "It will be ready in less than an hour."

"Nay, they expect us back early, I think. But since you're so hospitable, Cousin, we will not refuse some slight refreshment. I must own that my ride has whetted my appetite."

"If you will excuse me I will see to the matter at once," said Simon. "I cannot think why my aunt delays so long. Ah, here she comes."

At that moment, indeed, the door opened, and in came Miss Belinda, her face shining from its recent soaping, and her breath coming quickly, partly from the haste she had made, partly from nervousness. She curtsied low to both the visitors, starting as her eyes fell on Bertha.

"If I might make so bold, miss," she said, "and indeed it does seem a liberty, but when all's said and done she was your own aunt, and blood's thicker than water, as the sayin' goes. It seems a queer thing to say, and you such an elegant young lady and all, but still there it is, you see—and you're the very moral—the spit an' image, if I may say. The wonder is that Simon never told me, but wonder who shouldn't, for there's never a word to be got out of Simon from one week's end to another. But as how it is, Miss Weston—Miss Gifford, I mean—I'm fain to see you, though I cannot choose but cry—thinkin' of the poor thing as is gone.

Eh dear it might be her, as was standin' here, only your nose has a kind of lift in it, and her chin had a dimple. Eh, many an' many's the time I have seen my poor brother who is gone to his long home admirin' that dimple. But all flesh is grass, and dimples goes the way of everything else. And haply, miss, you are just as well wi'out one. Eh dear, eh dear," groaned Miss Binney dismally, "very like you are!"

Edward, who had at first stared in astonishment at the voluble old lady, burst into a loud guffaw at the conclusion of her tirade; but Bertha, equally puzzled to begin with, at length began to have some dim notion of Miss Belinda's meaning.

"You think that I am like my aunt," she said, taking Miss Binney's hand kindly. "I am not surprised. They tell me I am very like my mother's family."

Simon glanced at her quickly, and then averted his eyes without speaking. Miss Belinda pushed forward chairs for her visitors, and herself sat down on the extreme edge of the carved oak settle.

"Like, Miss Gifford!" she exclaimed. "It might be her as was here before me—an' the voice an' all—dear o' me! An' even to th' feather in your hat. I mind my poor sister-in-law had a bonnet wi' black feathers—a very pretty thing it was, but I'm old-fashioned, and I don't hold much wi' feathers for country folks—the rain spoils 'em so easy. Eh, but to think of your having a feather, too! Things falls out so queer. Now, there's Simon—he doesn't take after his mother at all in most things, and yet to see him open an egg—you'd think it was herself!"

"And how does he open a bottle, I wonder?" put in young Gifford, who found Miss Fleetwood's discourse slightly wearisome, and was anxious to bring matters back to the point at which they had been interrupted by

her entrance. "I'm curious to see how he sets about that operation, and as we have not much time to spare I hope it may take place speedily."

Simon had from the first resented the mixture of familiarity and insolence in his cousin's tone, and was now somewhat affronted by this very broad hint. Something in the other's eager manner, moreover, and a latent apprehension which he seemed to detect in the glance which Bertha cast upon her brother, aroused a sudden suspicion which did not tend to make the request less distasteful.

"I fear, Mr. Gifford," he replied coldly, "that I cannot offer you any refreshment that you will think it worth while to partake of, though the best I have is at your service. We live very simply here, and there is no wine in the house."

"Pooh, as to that, I am not particular, my dear fellow. A glass of brandy or even of hollands would warm one famously."

"I was about to add that we drink no spirits," said Simon in the same tone.

"Then what in the Devil's name do you drink, man?" cried Edward irritably.

"There is light beer of our own brewing," said Fleetwood quietly; "and there is plenty of milk, and my aunt keeps the household supplied with ginger ale."

"And you forget, Nephew, the orange brandy," put in Miss Belinda eagerly. "I have but just finished making it, and, though I say it as shouldn't, there isn't its equal in the country-side. 'Tis a most excellent cordial, I assure you, sir—wonderful for the spasms, or for a chill or that. I make a gallon every year, an' the village folk they think the world of it."

"It is sweet stuff, good enough for a cordial, but I should not care to offer it to anybody to drink," returned

her nephew hastily, struck by the beseeching expression in Bertha's eyes.

"Nay, but if the gentleman's feeling so chilly he'll have taken cold very like, an' a sup of this will just set him to rights. An' if the young lady would be so good as to taste it—she looks but pale, Nephew—it would really do her good. I'll fetch it in a minute."

"That's right," exclaimed Edward approvingly. "Come, let's taste the orange cordial; and you, Cousin, do not look so sour. Since this decoction is made for deserving folk, why not begin with your own kith and kin?"

Miss Fleetwood, full of delighted hospitality, produced a large bunch of keys from the pocket of her stiff black silk gown, and rustled out of the room; her voice being presently heard objurgating Susan and Dolly and issuing excited commands for the japanned tray and the best decanter. During the somewhat uncomfortable pause which ensued, Simon endeavoured with no very great success to entertain his guests, and it was with a mixture of relief and apprehension that he heard the clinking of glasses which announced the arrival of Dolly with her tray. A very nice little repast was set forth on this tray—delicate slices of cold ham, ethereal bread and butter, jannock (a species of oatcake of Miss Belinda's making), a cream cheese snugly ensconced in its protecting rushes; but the eyes of all present fixed themselves by common accord, though with different motives, on the heavy, cut-glass decanter in the centre, which contained an unctuous liquid, golden and clear.

"My own recipe," announced Miss Binney triumphantly. "It has been in our family for years an' years—that an' the recipe for a Christmas pudden'. 'Tisn't many folks as knows of that; but we make our pudden' one year, ye know, to be eaten the next. Ye might see

ours in the larder now, as black as my shoe and wonderful rich. It was always the custom in our family to make 'em that way. Now, Simon, why don't you fill out for your cousins? There ye stand an' see them lookin' at it, an' don't offer to do anythin'."

"Pray, Miss Gifford, let me persuade you to taste a little of my aunt's famous cordial," said Simon, with as good a grace as he could muster.

But Bertha refused with a scared look, and he then turned to her brother, who eagerly took the glass and immediately drained it.

"Most excellent, indeed," he cried. "Why, man, it must make people glad to be ill if you doctor them with such stuff as this. It warms one's very heart. I will trouble you for another glass, Cousin, and many thanks for your good treatment. Here's to you, Cousin Simon, and to you, madam; and last, but not least, to the black-eyed beauty who made us acquainted."

He emptied his glass again, and held it out to be once more replenished.

"Nay, now that I think on it, she deserves a health all to herself. Here's to Rachel, pretty Rachel, and all her whims, be they what they may! 'Twas her whim, Cousin, you know, that brought us two together—why, no one can tell, but she would have it so, and I'm pleased to do her bidding. I would do more than that for her—and you're a right good fellow at bottom, I dare swear, though not quite the kind of kinsman one expected to hob-nob with. But since Rachel will have it, we'll not complain."

Simon's colour had risen so high that Bertha remarked it, and, deeming that it rose from indignation at her brother's tone, plucked Edward warningly by the sleeve. But he shook her off with a noisy laugh.

"We are all friends here," he said, "and for the matter of that I care not who knows that I am Miss Rachel

Charnock's slave. Slave to-day, ha! ha! Perhaps master before so very long. By your leave, Fleetwood, I will fill up again.

He stretched out his hand for the decanter, but Simon, coming to himself with a start, quietly moved it out of his reach.

"In justice to my aunt," he said with rather a constrained smile, "I must save her cordial from the reproaches which it would earn if you partook too freely of it. It is necessarily made of new and fiery spirit, and is, besides, as you must notice, luscious and sweet. It is only meant to be drunk in small quantities: we do not, indeed possess glasses of the proper size; these are very large, you see. I would not on any account have it said that you were the worse for a visit to my house."

"Pooh! I'll risk it," exclaimed Edward, leaning forward with an angry flush.

"Nay, but I will not," returned his host with calm determination, and, rising, he locked up the decanter in the old-fashioned chiffonier; then, returning to the table, he added laughing, with an attempt to gloss over the awkwardness of the incident, "you see I know the quality of the brew and the ill effects that might ensue when you reach the open air. And since you are not only to be your sister's escort along our rough Lancashire lanes, but to present yourself among ladies' society on your return home, I think it well for the honour of my house to take needful precautions."

"You are an insulting fellow," cried Gifford violently. "I regret having demeaned myself by coming here. I'll never set foot inside your door again, let Rachel Charnock say what she likes."

Simon turned suddenly towards him with flashing eyes and compressed lips, but Bertha, not knowing the real cause of his anger, intervened hastily:—

"Pray, Cousin Fleetwood, do not notice him," she whispered anxiously. "He does not know what he is saying just now. Dear Edward," she added aloud, "do you not think it is time for us to be going?"

"Aye, indeed, it is time to be going, more than time —I'm off, I know, and you can follow when you like. Confound it all, Bertha, how you can brook to stop here another instant, after that d—d ill-mannered yokel's treatment of us, I cannot conceive! D—d impertinent country bumpkin—'tis evident he has no acquaintance with gentlemen. But I'll not condescend to parley with him—a horse-whipping is the only argument he would understand."

Mr. Edward Gifford, however, made no attempt to turn from violent words to violent deeds, and, with a last scornful glance in the direction of the young yeoman, rushed out of the room, taking no notice of Miss Belinda's repeated and deprecating curtsies.

"Lord ha' mercy on us!" she ejaculated. "It is a pity you should have put him in such a stew, Simon, and him such a nice, pleasant-spoken gentleman. Eh dear, eh dear, there he goes very nigh on his head! It's a mercy if the stones yonder don't trip him: he cannot so much as find his way to the stable. Well, Simon, I do think it ill-done of you; and where in the world is Bill, I wonder?"

With murmurs and lamentations Aunt Binney had followed the departing guest from the hall to the yard; and Bertha, profiting by her absence, turned tearfully to Simon.

"I beg you to excuse my brother," she said. "Do not —do not think ill of him. If it were not for this one weakness—which of course he has shown too plainly to-day—he would give me no real anxiety. He has an excellent heart."

Simon cared little for Mr. Gifford's good qualities, except in so far as they affected one particular point; and to this point he now alluded in his usual straightforward fashion.

"Is it true?" he asked, bending his keen eyes inquiringly upon her, "that your brother intends to offer himself as a suitor for Miss Charnock's hand?"

"He is much attracted by her," replied Bertha, a little surprised. "It is, I may say, an understood thing—I think his suit has the approval of her parents—at all events, of Mr. Charnock. So at least I've understood my brother to say."

"And Miss Charnock herself?" he pursued quietly. His calm strong face betrayed none of his secret agitation, and Bertha, all unconscious of his personal interest in the matter, replied innocently, "Oh, I don't know—I think she likes him."

"Does she know of this fault of his? Do you really believe that her parents would allow her to marry a drunkard?"

"Oh, Mr. Fleetwood, do not use so harsh a word. Indeed, my brother is not that. It is but of late years he has formed this bad habit—you know so many gentlemen are fond of wine."

"That is true," agreed Simon with a sigh.

"And then a happy marriage would be the best means of reforming him; there can be no doubt of that. And dear Rachel has so much character. But there is my brother calling, I must not make him more angry. Goodbye, Cousin, try to forgive him; he will be the first to regret his conduct."

She thrust out her hand, which Simon took without noticing its trembling, nor yet the tearful pleading of the pretty blue eyes. He made no attempt to follow her to the door, but stood gazing fixedly before him until his

aunt returned bewailing the hasty departure of their guests, and requesting that the remains of her maligned orange cordial might be forthwith returned to her.

"What came over you, Nephew, I'm sure I cannot tell; no wonder the gentleman was in a passion. I've seen my own grandfather stamp and rave fit to burst a blood-vessel when my grandmother so much as hinted as he'd had enough. But she'd no more have thought of taking away the bottle—an' him her own husband, mind you—than she would have of jumping over the moon; an' you to go that bold an' lock up the brandy the very first time that nice, handsome young gentleman sets foot i' th' house. Let me tell you, Simon, if it wasn't for making a disturbance before strangers, I'd have paid you the value of the stuff right down and had it straight out again. 'Tis your brandy I know well enough—everything i' this house is yours—but next year, if I live, I'll make a gallon for myself, please Heaven—at least I'll not have the family disgraced by letting company be turned away from the door that gate."

Simon unlocked the chiffonier and restored the decanter to his aunt in silence; but she was not appeased.

"Never did I see any one like ye, Simon," she grumbled. "'Twas never the way of the Fleetwoods to be that stiff. Why, Grandfather, I tell you, liked a drop o' drink as well as any one, and no one was more respected in the neighbourhood. And my father, honest man, had a glass every now and then and was none the worse for it. As for my dear brother, you know as well as I do, Simon, that he thought no harm of an occasional bowl of punch with a neighbour, though he was a very temperate man. But as for you, I well nigh believe you'd rather die than make merry. But I'll have my own gallon of orange brandy next year as how 'tis."

"And so you shall, Aunt Binney," said Simon. "You

shall even have two, if you like; provided you are discreet in your hospitality."

He smiled at the old lady as she walked away with her tray, but became very grave when once more alone.

Crossing the room to the mantelpiece he stood leaning against it, endeavouring to collect his thoughts. What was it the man had said—and the girl too? Was it possible that such a creature as Gifford aspired to Rachel's hand? He spoke coolly of the day when he should be her *master*. Her master! As though to call her perpetual mistress and queen were not too sweet, too bright a lot almost to be contemplated by mortal man. And it was considered possible that this angel of light would be mated with yonder idle coarsely-spoken sot—she might, *perhaps*, reform him. Good Heavens what was every one about? Why, the mere thought of it drove him mad!

But let him collect his wits—surely poor Bertha deluded herself. In another moment he almost laughed aloud over his own folly in being thus scared. Of course the thing was impossible; under no circumstances would Gifford have been considered a fit match for Miss Charnock. Why the man was Simon's own cousin!

CHAPTER XI.

I see you what you are: you are too proud;
But if you were the devil you are fair.

—SHAKESPEARE.

AN hour or two later on that same day Rachel was very comfortably ensconced in one of the deep window seats of the morning-room; her little fingers were busily employed on a curious piece of work—no other than the making of a shoe. Many quaint relics of the past were to be found stowed away in the lumber-rooms of Charnleigh Hall, and recently she had come across a set of miniature cobbler's tools and some small narrow lasts which exactly fitted her own shoe. These, on inquiry, she had found belonged to her grandmother, who had herself made use of them at a time when it was a whim among ladies to fashion their own shoes of all kinds of colours and materials to match their gowns. Now Rachel united a child's passion for novelty with the more womanly craving to occupy those active hands of hers in some task not altogether useless. If her grandmother had made shoes, so would she. She accordingly polished up the little tools, took lessons from the village cobbler, and rapidly perfected herself in the art. As she now sat on the cushioned ledge, the small feet dangling from beneath her frilled skirt were encased in blue slippers of her own making, while she was actually covering one of the lasts aforesaid with rose-coloured satin.

The very incarnation of spring looked she, with the

strong sunlight pouring down upon her soft curls, outlining with light the graceful contours of throat and shoulder, and flashing upon the little awl that she plied so rapidly. It was one of her prerogatives that the colour she wore at any given moment seemed to become hers by a special right, and to bring under notice, and enhance, certain qualities in her beauty which had been hitherto unsuspected. Thus, when she donned crimson it seemed to vie with the soft rich colour of those lovely lips of hers, and when she wore pink the delicate roses on her cheeks seemed brighter; and from under her great black befeathered hat those dark eyes of hers flashed with more witching grace than ever. To-day she wore a muslin gown, white and clinging —her usual indoor attire indeed—and her neck and pretty arms, with their warmer tone of white, looked nevertheless the fairer for the contact; and it was confined by a sash of light blue, which did not match anything at all about her except her shoes, and the sky which could be seen through the leaded panes above her head. In her bosom she had placed a bunch of apple-blossom, dewy and fresh from its recent picking; and as she worked she sang a little tune under her breath, and swung one foot in time to the measure.

Breaking in suddenly upon her contented solitude came Humphrey Charnock, with a lowering brow and every appearance of angry perturbation.

"So there you are, Miss Rachel!" he cried, slamming the door behind him and crossing the room hastily. "I have been looking for you."

"Have you, indeed, Cousin?" returned Rachel, poising the awl in her hand, and looking up serenely.

"Yes, I have indeed. I have a bone to pick with you, I can tell you."

"Then sit down and pick it comfortably," said Rachel,

pushing forward with the point of her slender foot a chair which happened to stand within reach of it.

Her cousin did sit down, but his face did not relax; on the contrary he regarded Rachel with eyes which blazed with anger, and he bit his lip as though in the endeavour to keep back words harsh enough to alarm her. But Rachel was not in the least disturbed; nobody ever scolded or quarrelled with her, and it occurred to her that the experience might be amusing. So she sat very composedly stitching, and, after a time, finding he did not speak, raised her bright eyes for a moment from her work and said inquiringly:—

"Well?"

"Well, Rachel, I would have you know that you have done me a very ill turn by your mischievous folly."

Rachel dropped the shoe into her lap: "Why, what have I done, Cousin?" she asked in genuine amazement. "What folly can you mean?"

"What but the absurd notion of introducing the Giffords to that farmer fellow. Let me tell you, your quixotic ideas of effecting a reconciliation have not succeeded—Gifford has come back in a pretty fury, and vows he will never set foot in the place again."

"What a pity!" cried the girl, much crestfallen.

"And that is not all. The stupid soft-witted little sister has gone out of her mind, I think. Gifford declares she is positively moon-struck—flew at him, he says, like a tiger-cat because he rated her for her familiarity with the low folk yonder. He protests he could not get her away for ever so long, though Fleetwood had grossly insulted him; aye, and took the fellow's part against her own brother. Ned says 'tis his belief that the little fool has lost her heart to him."

To Humphrey's surprise Rachel's face, instead of being shocked and horrified as he anticipated, wreathed itself

with smiles; she took up her shoe again, with evident relief, and presently began to hum with every appearance of enjoyment.

"You seem very much pleased at what I tell you," said Humphrey testily. "Perhaps 'tis no news to you?"

"Bertha has not made any confidences to me on the subject," replied Miss Charnock discreetly. "But if you are right in your suspicions I own I should be pleased."

Her calm, decided tone irritated Humphrey beyond measure: that this chit not much more than midway through her teens should dare to interfere with his plans, and thus openly to express satisfaction at their frustration —it was not to be borne in patience. He would soon make her see her folly, and awe her into subjection.

"This seems to me a very foolish saying of yours," he remarked, with the cold displeasure which usually impressed her. "I doubt if you could give any reasonable motive for your satisfaction."

"Now, there you are wrong, Cousin Humphrey," retorted she. "I can give two most excellent motives. To begin with, if Bertha has lost her heart to Simon Fleetwood, she has doubtless cause to believe that he has lost his to her. If they marry she will have a very good husband, and I shall have a very nice neighbour. I rejoice on both accounts, for I am fond of Bertha."

"Perhaps you have suspected something of this attachment, then?"

"Perhaps I have, and perhaps I have not; but you may be quite sure that since I now hear on such reliable authority that there are good grounds for believing in its existence, I shall do my very best to further it."

"Then you are making a great mistake," cried Humphrey angrily. "It is most perverse and wicked of you to meddle with so serious a matter. You are doing your friend an injury."

Rachel twisted the end of her wax thread and gazed mockingly at the young man.

"Why so much warmth, Cousin?" she inquired. "It strikes me that you are very much interested in Bertha Gifford's fortunes—or I should perhaps say—fortune."

She nibbled at the end of the thread, her head turned a little sideways, and her eyes twinkling.

"Do you know," she continued presently, "the idea never occurred to me before, but I really begin to think that you intended Bertha to occupy a much more exalted position, namely, that of your wife."

Humphrey resented the impertinence, but he would not let her see how much it stung him.

"And if such were indeed the case, Rachel," he said coldly, "surely you, a Charnock of Charnleigh, must be the first to own that an alliance with me would be more to Miss Gifford's advantage than a repetition of the indiscretion which her unhappy aunt, I believe, never ceased to regret."

"Why, now, let us see," returned Rachel meditatively. "Let us consider the situation calmly. You happen to be in want of her sixty-thousand pounds, and, as you cannot very well ask her to bestow them upon you without at the same time bestowing herself, you are good enough to accept this unwelcome addition."

"That is a very rude and untruthful picture of the situation," began Humphrey; but she interrupted him:—

"Wait, wait, I have not finished; you have more tangible merits than this noble tolerance. Bertha will, of course, be made to understand that some day or other, when my father is dead, you will reign here in his stead, and she will be Mrs. Charnock of Charnleigh Hall. But do you know, Cousin Humphrey, Bertha is not at all worldly, and it is quite possible that, after all, she may

prefer to accept the honest hand of a good man who loves her."

The quiet incisive words that came so trippingly from Rachel's smiling lips had a smart and a sting in them that made the blood leap to Humphrey's face, but he contr...ed himself with an effort.

"My little cousin," he said, "your views are those of a romantic child. It is quite possible that a strong mutual attachment may exist in a union which may offer equally strong mutual advantages. But, as I say, it would be foolish to expect you to understand such things."

"Well, Humphrey," replied the girl, turning about the little shoe in her hand and surveying it with evident satisfaction, "I can but congratulate you on the admirable manner with which you have hitherto concealed your attachment for Bertha Gifford. Truly, it appeared to my ignorant eyes as though you found her conversation tedious, and regarded her altogether with a kind of contemptuous indifference. But that, of course, was because I did not understand."

Charnock threw himself back in his chair with an affected yawn, succeeded by a slight smile.

"There are many things you do not understand, Rachel. You have, to begin with, crude, old-fashioned notions, drawn no doubt from the sentimental romances which you have read, about the position of woman, and the chivalrous attitude which man should hold towards her. Now, my dear child, in all ages men have allowed women to delude themselves with the fancy that we are their slaves, whereas in reality ——" He broke off with a short laugh.

Rachel's needle was quiet now, and she looked at her cousin with a heightened colour. "In reality?" she repeated.

"Well, the first woman was created, you must remember, entirely for the solace and more comfortable estate of man. The Creator saw that it was not good for him to be alone, and so He gave him a companion. And thus it has ever been through the ages—the woman is the supplement to the man's life."

Rachel looked up saucily. "There are two ways of regarding such matters," she said.

> "Auld Nature swears the lovely dears,
> Her noblest work she classes, O;
> Her 'prentice han' she tried on man,
> And then she made the lasses, O.'

This is the saying of a man, I beg to state, and a poet to boot."

"You have a flippant tongue, I must say," muttered Humphrey, unable for the moment to think of a better retort.

There was silence in the room for a short space, the young man moodily watching the little shoe as it was twisted this way and that by Rachel's nimble fingers. Neither her skill nor her patience had been equal to the task of making the under part of her bright-coloured foot-gear; she had contented herself with fashioning new tops to those she had already worn. That which she was now covering was of French make, a dainty, ridiculous thing, with a preposterously narrow toe and high heel. The few months' wear to which it had already been subjected had imparted to it a distinct and seductive character; one could not see it without recalling the arch of the slender foot it was permitted to clothe; its grace, its lightness. As Humphrey gazed at it his anger began to melt; he was a young man of taste as well as of spirit, and he could forgive much to the owner of that shoe.

Rachel did not guess his thoughts; her own were occupied with vengeful desires to humiliate the man

who held her sex so lightly. Though her eyes were bent demurely on her work her mind dwelt neither on the shoe itself, nor on the foot which was to wear it, save, perhaps, in a metaphorical sense, with the burning wish to trample on her adversary.

Gradually Humphrey's eyes travelled from the shoe to the hand that held it; wandering thence past the slender wrist and the soft white arm, which peeped out from its muslin d a'ery, and so on, following the exquisite curving lines till they rested on the face which crowned them. Rachel feigned to be unaware of his scrutiny, but the length and boldness of it increased her secret sense of affront and injury. She did not know that her cousin was marvelling to himself over the fact that the pretty lively child, of whom he had hitherto taken but small account, was rapidly developing into a very lovely and fascinating maiden. When at length, finding the silence oppressive, she raised her eyes, she was surprised to observe that Humphrey was actually smiling.

"Come, Cousin," he cried gaily, "I will own that I am worsted in the argument. You have certainly a ready wit, my dear. I wish I might enlist you in my cause. Since you think I have set about my courtship with so ill a grace, perhaps you could give me a useful hint or two. Pray tell me candidly, how did I manage to convey to you that I looked upon Miss Gifford with—what was it you said—'contemptuous indifference'?"

"Ah, that was by my woman's instinct," cried Rachel.

"Your woman's instinct quotha," laughed Humphrey. "In truth you must tell me before we proceed further how long it is since you have been a woman, Rachel."

Rachel fixed her eyes serenely on him, and answered sedately: "About half an hour, I think, Cousin".

"Indeed!" he cried amused. "And what may have been the cause of the sudden metamorphosis?"

"I cannot tell," she replied more seriously, "unless it was your very insulting and disrespectful remarks about my sex. When I heard you speak slightingly of women, I felt all at once that I was a woman."

Humphrey was becoming interested; he began to edge his chair closer to the window, but she threw out her hand with a little frown. "You need come no nearer, I assure you. I can see and hear you very well where you are."

He stopped short with a bewildered laugh; the minx had, indeed, suddenly developed.

"I most humbly crave pardon for any remarks of mine which have offended you," he said, after a pause. "Pray forgive me, and teach me what I must do and say to please you better. I will be a most meek and docile pupil, I promise you."

He spoke in jest, yet with a little underlying note of earnestness which she was quick to detect. She stitched away in silence, however, and after a moment or two he continued: "How would you have me deal with your sex, Rachel?"

She laid down her work and gazed at him earnestly; to her surprise she saw his colour mount beneath her glance. Her mother had been right, it seemed; there was a certain power in a girl's eyes. With feigned unconsciousness, yet with a delightful inward sense of triumph, she averted them presently, and said with a gravity that was not assumed:—

"I would have you treat all women with honour and respect, Cousin Humphrey; and as to the woman you are wooing ——"

She paused, glanced at him again, and then dropped her eyes.

"Go on," he cried eagerly. "The woman I am wooing ——"

She smiled a little malicious smile to herself, and returned lightly:—

"Well, as to the woman you are wooing, Cousin Humphrey, surely she must teach you, and not I."

"Alas, I am so backward a scholar, dear Rachel, conscious of my deficiencies, and yet unable to remedy them. I fear to go before my mistress with my lesson unlearnt. Do but give me a hint or two."

She looked at him and heaved an impatient sigh. "Well, I suppose I must. What do you wish to learn? Let us have an end of it quickly."

"Since we are rehearsing," said Humphrey, "let us imagine that *you* are the woman I love and am anxious to win, and that I wish to ask a favour of you. Now, how must I set about it?"

"You must ask for it on your knees, of course," replied Rachel promptly. "But you should have begun by saying something pretty."

"So be it! 'Tis a trifle inconvenient to fall upon one's knees, but I will obey my mentor at all costs. Now, what pretty thing shall I say?"

"You are the best judge of that," she replied demurely.

He bent forward a little and said softly: "I cannot resist the witchery of those dancing eyes."

"A little strong to begin with," commented Rachel, "and Bertha's eyes do not dance. You had better substitute the word *melting* when you repeat the lesson in earnest, but, if I were you, I should not hazard it too soon. Well, now go on."

"But you should say something, surely?"

"Nay, 'tis my part to say nothing. I am very sure that Bertha will say nothing. But proceed."

"Have you no word for me?" murmured Humphrey in a tone of mock entreaty, which did not at all hide from Rachel an underlying and very real agitation. "Do you

not see that you have made an impression on me which I find it impossible to resist? This very day I was about to ask a favour of you. Do not be so cruel as to deny me."

"Very good indeed," said Rachel approvingly. "And now, down on your knees. But what is it you wish to ask for?"

"What dare I ask for?" murmured Humphrey as he slowly sank into the prescribed posture.

"Oh, I don't know," returned Rachel hastily, for she began to feel uncomfortable at the unfeigned ardour of his tone and gaze. "A flower, perhaps; but be quick and let us have done with it."

"May I not ask to kiss her hand?" pleaded Humphrey.

"If she gives you the flower it will be time enough to think about that."

Just as the request was formulated, with due humility and an earnestness which could not but flatter the recipient, the door opened and in walked Edward Gifford. At sight of his start of astonishment and sudden flush of jealous anger, and Humphrey's discomfiture at being caught in such a position, Rachel became suddenly possessed by a very demon of mischief.

"Remain where you are," she said authoritatively to Humphrey, then turning to young Gifford, "we are playing a kind of game here. Would you like to join us?"

Edward's brow cleared to a certain extent, but he still looked suspiciously at Humphrey. He crossed the room rapidly and stood by Rachel. The effect of his morning's potations had evaporated, save for a certain unusual irritability and excitement. "What is the game?" he cried. "I will join with all my heart."

"Why, I am teaching my cousin how he must ask a

lady for a flower. He is trying, as you see, to make his request with the best possible grace."

"Come, if there is a flower to be given away I will put in my claim," cried Gifford.

"Nay, but not in so fierce or rude a fashion. See my cousin Humphrey on his knees—you must outdo him in courtesy and excellence of persuasion if the flower is to be awarded to you. Now, let us see who will ask most prettily."

Gifford threw himself on his knees and clasped his hands together; Humphrey laughed and extended his. Rachel looked demurely from one to the other, and then slowly drew forth the sprig of apple-blossom from her dress. She appeared to hesitate, and though Humphrey smiled still, there was a lurking anger in his eyes.

"I was the first to ask, you know," he urged after a pause. "You will not deny my right, Cousin?"

"Right! Who talks of right?" cried Gifford, almost in a roar. "Miss Charnock, who can have a better right than I, who have always been your most devoted servant?"

"'Devoted servant' sounds well," said the girl approvingly. "What say you, Humphrey? You will find it hard to improve upon the phrase."

"I," cried Humphrey, "am your most loving cousin—is not that better?"

"What is a cousin?" put in Gifford; "a fig for cousins. I am your lover, Miss Rachel, and you know it."

"Nay, nay, you must not exaggerate," said Rachel. "But what have you to say to that, Humphrey?"

"I say that this is a foolish game—it was not meant that three should play at it. One must withdraw and let the others finish it in peace."

"Then will you withdraw, Humphrey? That would be a pity, for surely you began it."

"And so I did. Let him go, Rachel, and give the flower to me."

"Would it not be uncivil to desire him to go?" she said innocently; "he is a visitor, you know. No, you must be patient, gentlemen, and let me think."

She paused, putting her finger reflectively to her lip. The two men glared at each other as they knelt on either side of her. "You are our guest, Mr. Gifford, and call yourself besides my 'devoted servant'—I must not forget that. And you, Humphrey, are my cousin, and blood is thicker than water, is it not? Besides, I promised to teach you the lesson."

She gazed seriously at him as he knelt there, all pretence forgotten, hanging breathlessly upon her words; every moment that she held him thus in bondage was a delight to her.

"Let me see, let me see; it is very hard to decide. But there, do not be impatient, I will decide in one minute! Now, when I say *One*, *two*, *three*, you will be ready. Then the one to whom I shall give the flower may rise from his knees."

She herself stood up holding the blossom aloft.

"Now, *One*, *two*, *three!*"

Simultaneously both men half rose; Gifford flung out a hand to drag back Humphrey's arm, but, with an oath, the other wrenched it free. Rachel stepped past them, and then turned, slowly lowering the flower.

"Gentlemen, you may both get up," she said suavely, "for I have decided to keep my posy myself."

She tripped away, turning at the door to curtsey; Gifford had broken into a foolish laugh, but Humphrey's face was white with anger.

Madam Charnock met her on the stairs, and gazed at her in amazement.

"Why, child, how flushed you are; how odd you look!"

Rachel smiled, frowned, and finally flung herself into her mother's arms with something like a sob.

"Mother, mother, I am a wicked girl! I believe I shall end like Rachel the Rake!"

CHAPTER XII.

Drink, then! I chide thee not,
Deny thee not my bowl.
Come, stretch forth thy hand, then—so!
Drink, drink again!

—MATTHEW ARNOLD.

THE next day Simon chanced to have some unimportant buisness with the lawyer at the neighbouring small town of Saltfield. Mr. Renshaw had been a crony of his father's, and from time to time Simon thought himself obliged to accept his hospitality, and to entertain him in return at the Farm. Therefore, when on this particular afternoon the old gentleman clapped him jovially on the back and insisted on his putting up his gig and remaining to dinner, young Fleetwood accepted without hesitation.

While they sat together in the snug parlour awaiting the hour of the repast there came a loud, imperious knock at the street door, and in another moment Edward Gifford was ushered in.

"Here I am, Mr. Renshaw—as good as my word, you see," he cried, as the old man rose in surprise and perturbation "Come to take pot luck with you, and to crack a bottle of that famous old port that you were bragging about the other day at Charnleigh. What! Do not look so flabbergasted, man—I said I'd take you unawares, you know, and I deserve some amends for letting myself be fleeced by you and your precious Squire. He's a knowing old dog, Renshaw, and, for the matter of that, so are you. I'll engage your port is prime stuff; so we'll have a bottle a piece."

He poked Mr. Renshaw on the waistcoat and laughed loudly. "You have no conscience, you old rogue," he said, "but I daresay you've a good cellar. There are capital pickings to be had in your way of business. But four per cent, you know—'tis a devilish hard bargain, Renshaw! Another man in my shoes would have had seven."

"Come, come, Mr. Gifford," cried the lawyer, "I have done my best in the interests of my employer; and you, no doubt, have done what you thought to be best in your own interests. But we must not talk shop out of business hours. You are heartily welcome here, though if I'd known you were coming I would have made better preparation. I am honoured by your company, and so I am sure my young friend here will feel himself. Let me introduce him. Though the son of an honest yeoman he has good connections on the mother's side, and is, indeed, by education a gentleman. You will find him a pleasant, well-informed fellow."

This explanation was made hurriedly in an undertone as the pair advanced together towards the hearth; where, the evening being chilly, a small fire was burning. Simon had hitherto been sitting with averted face, so that Gifford had not identified him; but he now rose and bowed gravely.

"Mr. Gifford and I have already met," he said.

"Aye, that we have," cried Edward; "and it were better we had not, to my thinking. 'More than kin and less than kind,' I might well say. We are cousins, you must know, Renshaw."

"I am as little anxious for the fact to be remembered as you," said young Fleetwood quietly.

"Well, 'needs must when the Devil drives'—is not that the proverb? Faith, I am busy with proverbs to-day. Next to the Devil commend me to a woman for

obstinacy in carrying out a whim. Family disagreements are best let alone, to my thinking, but my pretty mistress will have an end of them, it seems. Let us shake hands, my clod-hopping cousin, for lovely Rachel's sake."

Simon flushed, and made no effort to respond to the invitation.

"I bear you no ill-will," he said, "but I think the ceremony is useless; and I do not see," he added with more warmth, "what can be your object in bringing up Miss Chranock's name. Having in her kind-heartedness tried to reconcile us, the matter ceases to concern her, and I must own that your familiar tone in alluding to her is extremely distasteful to me."

"How so?" demanded Gifford fiercely. "D—— your impudence, sir, what right have you to form an opinion as to my tone?"

"Just this right," replied Simon. "I and my father before me have always esteemed and respected the Squire and his family. No one shall speak impertinently of Miss Charnock in my presence."

"Why, then, you can relieve us of your presence," sneered Edward. "The sooner the better say I."

"I was about to do so," returned Simon very quietly. "I feel sure that Mr. Renshaw will allow me to postpone my visit to him to a more convenient time."

"I shall do nothing of the sort, my dear Simon," cried the lawyer, who had been growing very red in the face, and fidgeting anxiously from one foot to the other. "I will not allow the son of my old friend to leave my house in this fashion. As a favour to me, Simon lad, you will stay. As for you, Mr. Gifford, let us have no more angry words, I beg. If you are cousins, gentlemen, which I am surprised to learn, the more reason for your being good friends—all honour to Miss Charnock for saying so. We all know that you have the best reasons for respecting

the Squire and his family, though you will have your joke, Mr. Gifford. Now, here comes Sarah to lay the cloth. I will myself go in search of that port, Mr. Gifford. Sit down, gentlemen, sit down, and let harmony prevail, I beg."

He trotted away, while Simon and Edward seated themselves silently; Simon, during his absence, gazing somewhat moodily at the floor, the other drumming on his knees. Presently the old gentleman returned, carrying with the utmost caution two cobwebby bottles, which he carefully placed in a horizontal position on the sideboard.

"Fetch the decanters, Sarah," he murmured in a reverent, indeed almost awe-struck, tone. "Quietly, wench! Now, the strainer. Whatever you do, Sarah, do not jog my elbow."

Holding his breath so that his face gradually assumed a purple hue, and with eyes starting with excitement, he slowly and solemnly tilted one of the bottles in question, suffering its contents to dribble cautiously into the decanter. When he had finished he turned with a triumphant air to Gifford.

"Will you not open the other?" said that gentleman, who had been eagerly watching him.

"One at a time, surely," returned the lawyer in dignified surprise. "Excuse me, young sir, you do not quite realise that this wine has not its like in England. The bin is getting low, alas! It is not for every man that I would get out even one bottle. I have some very good stuff here in the cellaret which you shall drink during dinner; then afterwards, sir, afterwards, when you are prepared and mellowed, so to speak, you shall tell me what you think of *this*," affectionately tapping the neck of the decanter.

"Nay, but listen, Renshaw. When we have been mellowed, as you call it, will your hand be steady enough,

think you, to decant the other bottle without disturbing the crust? Better make sure now while your head is cool. 'Twere a thousand pities not to do full justice to such wine as that."

Mr. Renshaw looked at him for a moment solemnly; then a kind of unwilling admiration broke over his face:—

"Upon my word, Mr. Gifford, you are a genius in your way—young in years, but ripe in wisdom. Such a suggestion, sir, would do credit to your grandfather, if you have one. I shall act on it."

He treated the second bottle in the same manner as the first, smiling to himself the while, clicking his tongue against his teeth, and occasionally ejaculating: "Wonderful, wonderful! and only twenty-four".

When the operation was at length concluded he crossed the room to the cellaret, got out a bottle of the inferior vintage, informed Sarah that she might serve the dinner, and with a smiling countenance invited the gentlemen to take their places.

Though Simon was the son of his old friend, and dear to him as well on many another account, it was noticeable that during the earlier part of the repast the host's favour and attention seemed chiefly directed towards Mr. Gifford. The acumen and understanding which that young man had displayed with regard to so important a matter as the opening of a bottle of that admirable port had touched the old gentleman in a vulnerable spot. He loved Simon, but he venerated Edward. His eyes sought Gifford's a trifle anxiously as he fingered his first glass of wine, raised it to the light, tasted it critically, and finally drained it to the dregs. Then, indeed, Mr. Renshaw's countenance expanded and he heaved a deep sigh of relief.

"Not to be despised, eh, sir?"

"Not to be despised, indeed, Renshaw. By the Lord Harry, 'tis first rate; I wish my father had brought me up to be a lawyer."

He pushed forward his glass, which was quickly and smilingly replenished.

Simon drank little, according to his wont, and took but a small share in the conversation, which, indeed, turned chiefly on different vintages, the marvellous bargains which certain clēver people, who kept their eyes open and their tongues quiet, could occasionally drive with ignorant folk who did not know the value of the stuff in their own cellars, enlivened occasionally by anecdotes of by-gone treaties with smugglers. Meanwhile Mr. Gifford's glass was emptied many times and promptly refilled; his face had become flushed and his speech a little thick; a second bottle had followed the first, and now the cloth was removed and the famous port placed on the table.

Mr. Renshaw's hand trembled, not from the effect of his potations, but from sheer excitement, as he poured out a full bumper for his appreciative guest; and he smiled broadly as he watched him raise it to his lips. But, apparently, struck by a sudden thought, Gifford paused midway, and stretching out the hand which held the glass and rising to his feet, cried in stentorian tones:—

"I call upon you to drink a toast, gentlemen: Here's to my bride, my bonny winsome bride, and to our speedy union."

Simon had partly risen in politeness to his host, who had stiffly got on to his gouty old legs, but now reseated himself. Gifford observing this, inquired angrily what he meant by such lack of gallantry, and whether it could be possible that he meant to decline to drink the lady's health.

"I will not drink her health," replied Simon, "until I know her name."

"Her name; d—— me, you know it well enough. Why, Rachel, lovely Rachel, the daintiest, charmingest, sweetest bride that ever a man laid claim to. Confound it all, you will not be such a cur as to refuse to drink her health, sir."

"I will drink her health with all my heart, but not as your bride, sir," responded Simon with flashing eyes. Then, springing up, he lifted his glass and continued in low deliberate tones—"To Miss Rachel Charnock, our Squire's daughter: Long Life, Honour and Prosperity. May God Almighty bless her, and send her one day a husband worthy of her!"

"Pooh! it's the same thing," cried Gifford, impatient to drain his glass; "the port is too good to be kept waiting while we split hairs. I, too, will drink that toast. To Rachel Charnock and to her honourable husband that is to be—otherwise to my most noble self. I care little for your ill-will, Cousin Clod-hopper. A husband who deserves her, say you? Truly I may lay claim to the title, for I am buying her dear, am I not, Renshaw? Sly old Renshaw, who drives as hard a bargain as the Devil himself. But come, you old sinner, I will forgive you much for the sake of that port. Fill up, fill up another glass to Rachel; such wine as this shall be dedicated to no other name, I swear. Here's to Rachel again, the cunning little jade, with her pretence of innocence all the time she is playing her part so well! Now kind, now cruel—drawing me on, and then making belief to flout me. Ha! ha! my pretty madam, we'll settle these old scores some day. I bide my time now, but later on my sweetheart shall find out who is master—eh, Renshaw? You were too wise, old man, to take to yourself a wife, or was it too foolish? You preferred to spend your substance on your cellar. But I will have all—I will buy me ruby lips as well as ruby wine; I will have kisses and

smiles at my order. Come, another glass! Ruby wine and ruby lips—bonny Rachel's lips!"

Ere he had set down the glass Simon leaped to his feet; one or two hasty strides brought him to Gifford's side; he flung out his arm as though to strike him, but the other's swaying form eluded him, and, before he could touch it, fell heavily to the floor.

"Now Simon, Simon!" cried the lawyer, his usually rubicund and jovial face blanched and serious in a moment, while he laid a detaining hand upon the yeoman's arm. "How is this, Simon? What would your honoured father say at your thus seeking a brawl beneath my roof?"

"Sir," responded Simon hotly, "he would say that I did well. There are things that flesh and blood cannot bear. If you can endure to hear your patron calumniated, and his daughter insulted it is more than I can do. Mr. Renshaw, I wonder that you could stand by and listen to that ruffian when a word from you must have silenced him."

"Now, Simon," said the old gentleman, lifting a warning finger, "wait a bit—wait a bit! I could not speak that word. I am loth indeed to talk of professional matters to one who is not actually concerned in them, but there has been too much said for me to keep the matter secret from you; besides I can trust you. My dear young friend, Edward Gifford did not lie—he put the thing coarsely, and with a—a very regretable lack of gallantry; but it is more or less true that he has very solid claims to Miss Rachel's hand."

"True that her father has sold her to him?" interrupted Simon in a hoarse whisper.

"Hush, hush! Tut, tut, tut—there is no need for you to repeat what the fellow blurted out in his cups. There is—an understanding between him and the Squire.

Young Gifford is advancing Mr. Charnock a very large sum on mortgage. The estate is already heavily encumbered, and the terms are most advantageous to Mr. Charnock—more advantageous than he could have hoped for unless Mr. Gifford were particularly well-disposed towards him. It has, therefore, been agreed between them that, though Mr. Chranock will not of course put any undue pressure upon his daughter's feelings, he will favour Edward Gifford's suit."

A dead silence ensued, broken only by the stertorous breathing of the suitor in question. Simon's features had become white and rigid as though carved in marble, and Mr. Renshaw, gazing anxiously at them, could no more detect the inward emotions cloaked by their impassiveness, than he could have read the secret, ever present, never disclosed, hidden behind the cold mask of Death itself.

Presently Mr. Renshaw stepped up to the prostrate figure of Gifford, who, at first partially stunned by his fall, had now sunk into a heavy sleep.

"He will smother if we leave him like this," he said; and stooping, loosened Gifford's neck-cloth and placed him in an easier position.

"What are you going to do with him?" inquired Simon sternly. "If you send him back to the Hall in this condition I doubt if his suit will prosper."

"'Tis not to be thought of, indeed," cried Mr. Renshaw hastily. "The ladies would be sure to hear of it, and the Squire would truly be much displeased. I fear that all the blame will rest on me. Dear, dear, it is a thousand pities that the young man suffers his enthusiasm to run away with him. A fine fellow, Simon, most assuredly a fine fellow. Mark the broad shoulders of him, and what a leg! So shrewd, too—so appreciative—a marvel for his years. Were his head but a little stronger, he would be all but perfect."

Simon looked down at the six feet of debased manhood outstretched on Mr. Renshaw's carpet and made no reply. He seemed to be cogitating deeply, and presently raised his head as though he had come to a sudden decision.

"Mr. Gifford cannot return to the Hall," he said. "That, as you see, is quite out of the question; and if he were to remain here I fear he could not save his credit: the reason must become known."

"True, true," cried Mr. Renshaw, much agitated. "My credit also would suffer, Simon. Misguided young man! Why did he drink so deeply of the inferior wine?"

"On the other hand," pursued Simon, "what could be more natural than that he should spend the night with his own cousin whom he met here by accident, and who insisted on carrying him off?"

'My dear fellow, would you really?" cried Mr Renshaw, eagerly catching at the idea. "My blessing on you, Simon, if you extricate me from this dilemma."

Fleetwood again looked down at the snoring form at his feet and seemed to reflect before replying.

"But I thought you hated the fellow," continued the lawyer.

"Why, I do not love him, Mr. Renshaw; but, for all that, were it but for the honour of the blood that runs in his veins I will get him out of the way for the present. Yes, I will take my besotted kinsman off your hands and see that he comes to his senses before he leaves me."

"He will not be sober for hours yet," said the lawyer regretfully. "How will you get him away?"

"We will wait till dusk," replied the young man decidedly, "and then—oh we'll get him into my gig somehow."

Mr. Renshaw nodded, sighed, and finally, walking

back to the table, resumed his seat, and slowly filled his own glass.

"Simon," he said reprovingly, "yours is not yet empty."

Simon reseated himself and finished his wine, drinking it, however, with a preoccupied air.

"Pshaw!" cried old Renshaw, suddenly rising. "Come away, sir, come away. A man might as well set you down to a dish of tea. 'Tis more than I can endure to see the way you swallow that royal stuff. I will cast no more of my pearls before —— Nay, Simon I will not be rude, but, upon my life, sir, in some matters you might imitate our friend yonder with advantage."

And with a declamatory air the good old man pointed to where Gifford lay under the table.

CHAPTER XIII.

Where two fight
The strongest wins, and truth and love are strength.
—TENNYSON.

THE hours of waiting passed slowly enough, but at length the evening was deemed sufficiently dark for Simon to kidnap his unconscious kinsman. The servants were a-bed, and no one was abroad in the quiet village street. Simon put his horse in the gig himself, and brought it round to the door. The lawyer had been waiting anxiously on the threshold, and now peered out into the night.

"The question is," he muttered, "how to get him in?"

"I'll manage that," cried Simon, "if you will stand a moment by the horse."

He went into the house, stooped over Gifford, and seized him by the arm.

"Get up," he cried savagely. "Get up at once and come with me."

He hauled him to his feet and then dragged him to the street. Gifford, once on his legs, was not altogether helpless, and was conveyed to the gig without any very great effort on Simon's part; it was a more difficult matter to get him into it, but even this was finally accomplished, thanks to Fleetwood's vigorous exertions and to the persuasiveness of the lawyer.

"Don't let him fall out," cried the latter anxiously, as they drove away.

"I'll take care of him, never fear," returned Simon

grimly; and in a few minutes the horse's hoof-beats sounded faintly in the distance.

All was quiet at the Farm when the horse stopped in the wide yard. Gifford was still too stupid and heavy to take much note of his surroundings, merely inquiring, as he lurched heavily across the yard supported by the yeoman, who the devil he might be and where he was taking him.

"To bed," responded Simon.

This seemed reasonable and desirable under the circumstances, and Gifford made no further protest, even when Simon, throwing open the door of a large barn, thrust him down backwards on a heap of hay.

"Lie there!" he said fiercely, and left him, closing the door and shooting the bolt into its place. But Gifford's slumbers had regained possession of him ere the retreating footsteps had reached the other side of the yard.

Simon led the horse to the stable, fed him and rubbed him down, and then, taking with him his stable lantern, returned to the barn. Shutting himself in with his cousin, and laying his lantern on the floor, he took up his position opposite to him, leaning back against some piled-up trusses of hay and folding his arms.

Gifford lay at full length, his arms outstretched, his muscular throat exposed to view. Simon leaned forward after a time, gazing at him intently.

"He is not quite so tall as I am," he muttered, "but that matters little. He looks strong enough—he should be my match."

The sleeper stirred, and Fleetwood leaned back again, but his eyes did not close once that night.

Shortly after midnight the wind rose and swept round the barn with a rush and fury which would have aroused the young farmer even if he had been inclined to sleep. He knew these spring gales well, and thought with

concern of the havoc they wrought. The blossom would be scattered, the delicate new leafage stripped from the boughs—it would be well, indeed, if the boughs themselves were not torn from their parent trunks and sent groaning and creaking to the ground. The old tiles yonder on the house roof would be shaken and loosened perhaps; even at this distance he could hear the shutters rattling, and some door, left unfastened by a careless maid, creaking and slamming. He wondered, as many another watcher has done at such times as these, how any one could sleep through the turmoil; but he thanked Heaven for it: he wanted no one to wake just yet.

By-and-bye, through the screaming of the wind, another shriller sound came to his ears—the crowing of a cock. Day would soon be there—day was there. He rose and set open the door; already the out-houses and ricks, the presence of which he had before but dimly felt, were taking definite shape in an all-pervading greyness. He extinguished the lantern and closed the door, and went quietly into the house, returning presently with a jug of ale in one hand and a plate of bread and meat in the other.

As the barn door swung once more on its hinges Gifford opened his eyes and stared about him. First at the great beams overhead, then at the hay, finally at Simon standing in the doorway. To his heavy eyes, and in the dim light, this figure seemed to tower above him as that of a giant.

"You are awake," said Simon, drawing near rapidly.

"Why, so I fancied I was a moment ago; but, faith, I think I must be dreaming still!" returned Gifford with a laugh. He sat upright, stretching out his arms. "Have the kindness to tell me what is this place and how I come to be here. I got drunk, I suppose, at old Renshaw's. Is this his barn?"

"No," replied Simon, "it is mine. I brought you here."

"You did, did you, and what for?"

"First because, as you rightly guess, you were drunk, and Mr. Renshaw wished to avoid the disgrace of sending you back in such a condition to the Hall; and, secondly, because you and I must come to an understanding, Edward Gifford."

"Indeed," cried the other. "And what may you want with me, Simon Fleetwood?"

"First break your fast," said Simon; "'twill clear your head and steady your nerve. When you have finished your meal I will tell you what I want."

Gifford laughed, shrugged his shoulders, and fell to. By-and-bye he set down the jug and pushed away the plate.

"Now then?" he inquired.

"Well now," said Simon, "I am going to fight you."

Edward threw back his head and laughed.

"What!" he cried, "I offended you, I suppose, by some incautious speech when I was merry last night? I cannot in the least remember it, but if fight we must, I've no objection, providing the choice of weapons be left with me. Pray, are you a good shot, Cousin Fleetwood?"

"I am a very good shot, Cousin Gifford, but I've no mind to shoot you—no, nor to spit you either, though I have practised fencing in my college days. The same blood runs in our veins: I would not spill yours; but one of us must prove this day that he is the better man, and so we will fight with the tools which Nature gave us."

He stretched out his sinewy arm, and clenched his mighty hand.

Edward stared at him blankly, and finally imitated the gesture.

"If it comes to that I can play with my fists, too," he said, "but first, Cousin, pray tell me what we are to fight for?"

"I will tell you," said Simon. He came closer to Gifford who had now risen, and spoke earnestly, almost solemnly. "Edward Gifford, I will not have you lay claim to the hand of Rachel Charnock."

Edward stared for a moment or two, and then swore in very forcible language that he would stick to his bargain in spite of a thousand country boobies.

"You will not," said Simon with quiet determination. "Listen: take your choice. If you refuse to give up this plan of yours, I carry news of it straightway to Madam Charnock, making known to her, besides, the terms in which you speak of her daughter; the manner in which you disgraced yourself at Mr. Renshaw's last night—you will find, I think, that she is no party to this bargain. Or else come out like a man and fight me. We are evenly matched enough. If I beat you, you must withdraw all claims to the lady. If you beat me ——"

"Well, if I beat you, what then?"

"If you beat me I shall of course forfeit all right to interfere; but you will not beat me," he added quickly.

"Either way, it seems," sneered Gifford, "I am to lose the girl; there may be two opinions about that, but tell me why you are so eager to fight this lady's battles, Fleetwood? What is she to you, d—— you? Have you hopes on your own account, forsooth? What can it matter to you whom she marries? She is too dainty a prize to fall to your lot, Farmer Simon."

"No one knows that better than I do," replied Simon, turning a little pale. "My motives do not concern you; it is sufficient for you to know that while I live you shall not be Rachel Charnock's husband. Well, do you agree?

Quick, decide! But remember you must keep to your bargain."

"You give me no choice in the matter. I have no mind to leave my character in your hands—Madam, yonder, loves me little enough already. Come, I'll shut your mouth for you—are we to fight here?"

"No, there is not room enough. Come out under the great stack yonder in the field; we shall be sheltered from the wind and free from disturbance."

He led the way across the yard and down the lane, turning in at length to a large field in one corner of which stood the stack in question. The wind wrestled with them as they went, and the wayside trees creaked and groaned. The light was still faint and grey, and the dew heavy on the grass. The whole scene struck Edward with a chill forboding of disaster; the blasts seemed to pierce to his very marrow. As they paused beneath the rick, and he marked with what a shrill note the wind piped through the leaves, he could not repress a shudder. But its fierce cold breath seemed to lend Simon fresh vigour; he threw back his head and laughed joyously; then rapidly began to divest himself of coat and waistcoat. At that moment, though Edward was partially sheltered, Simon was standing in the very teeth of the wind, which set his hair streaming, and his shirt sleeves flapping and fluttering as he rolled them high on his arms. Edward glanced at him with a thrill of something between admiration and fear, "You will not beat me," Simon had said—in his heart of hearts he felt it to be more than likely that the prophecy would prove true. When presently the battle began, though the two men fought with equal science, Gifford soon realised that he had met more than his match. Simon, strong, perhaps, in the justice of his cause, fought with a dogged determination which carried all before it. The blows

which his cousin occasionally succeeded in planting seemed to affect him no more than if they had been so many hailstones; and gradually these grew feebler and wilder, Edward feeling like a man in a nightmare. His brain began to reel, he was conscious of a mocking note in the screaming of the wind; the trees that writhed in the blast seemed to stretch out menacing arms, the very hedge, of which he got a glimpse behind the rick, seemed to be rushing towards him; then he saw Simon's face avenging, triumphant—there was a crash, a shock, and all was dark.

A short period of unconsciousness ensued, and when he came to himself it was to find his head supported on his adversary's knee, and Simon assiduously bathing his face. So bruised and sore was Edward, so much exhausted, so crushed and humiliated by the sense of defeat, that for a time he lay passive under these ministrations, though, as a matter of fact, Simon's good offices were to him harder to endure than the blows which had gone before. But by-and-bye, rallying himself, he pushed away the hand which sought to heal the bruises it had caused, and struggled into a sitting posture. Simon, still kneeling on one knee beside him, looked at him with a quiet smile.

"You have had enough, I think. Come, Cousin, own that you are beaten, and in honour bound to relinquish all pretentions to Miss Charnock's hand. Tush, man! 'tis no disgrace to be beaten in fair fight and to give in honestly. Make the best of it. Now if you will take the advice of a reasonable man you will make away with all speed from this place before folks are beginning to stir about. If I were you I should not show myself at the Hall just now."

"Aye, curse you! you've made that impossible. But you shall not have my sister, I say. Come, let us have

a double bargain. If I give up Rachel Charnock—and I'll pick me up as good before I'm six months older—promise me that you will venture on no more impertinent gallantries with my sister."

"Good Heavens!" broke involuntarily from Simon. He almost laughed aloud at what seemed to him a preposterous idea.

"Aye, you need not think to brazen it out. What! you would have two sweethearts, you impudent dog? Why, what a Lothario is this! But come, lose no time—promise me!"

"I do not know what you mean," returned Simon, with gathering indignation. "For shame! Is nothing sacred to you? You make as little of your own sister as of the lady you profess to woo."

"You need not think to put me off like that," cried Gifford, turning his swollen and disfigured face towards him, and endeavouring to leer at him from out of his fast closing eye. "As far as Rachel is concerned, I leave her to you with an easy conscience, for you know as well as I do that you may whistle for her. But the affair with my sister is more serious. There is no use in denying it, man—I tell you the girl herself has owned ——"

But Simon threw out his hand suddenly, his eyes flashing and his face crimson: "Tell me nothing," he said sternly, "I will make no compact with you beyond the one you know of. Be faithful to your share and I will keep silence—I will promise nothing more than this. And now take yourself out of my sight, Edward Gifford, and keep that foul tongue of yours in order. I have beaten you once in open fight—take care that I do not thrash you like a hound."

Gifford slowly and painfully rose to his feet. "How the deuce am I to get away?" he inquired sullenly.

"Every bone in my body is aching. I dare look no one in the face in this plight."

"I will drive you to Ormskirk or Liverpool," cried Simon. "You can post home from there if you've a mind. I can give you a muffler to wrap round your face, and if you pull your hat over your eyes, people will not see that there is much amiss."

"A most generous offer, truly, but I am in no mood for travelling to-day, thank you, Cousin. Still, if you will drive me to Liverpool I will get me to bed at one of the hotels there, have my hurt seen to, and proceed with my journey to-morrow. I will send a note to Mr. Charnock, saying that important business calls me home at once."

"Then let us set out immediately," returned Simon. "'Tis nearly five o'clock: my men will soon be here."

"Put in the horse," growled Gifford, "and fetch me that muffler you spoke of. I have but to put on my coat and I am ready."

He limped slowly back to the barn, and Simon at once went in search of the horse. In a few minutes they were speeding along the roughly-paved road that led to Liverpool. They had almost reached their journey's end when Simon was surprised by a low chuckle from his companion. "That's right! Make the best of it," he said, smiling down good-naturedly.

"Aye, Cousin, things might have been worse," returned Gifford with a sardonic grin. "I'll get me another sweetheart and order home my sister—and there'll be the devil to pay yonder."

He fell to chuckling again. Simon, much mystified, gazed at him without speaking.

"I'd give something to see old Charnock's face," cried Mr. Gifford, and spoke no more until, alighting at the Adelphi Hotel, he issued an order for a bedroom and raw beefsteaks.

CHAPTER XIV.

Will fortune never come with both hands full,
But write her fair words still in foulest letters?
She either gives a stomach, and no food,—
Such are the poor, in health; or else a feast,
And takes away the stomach,—such are the rich,
That have abundance, and enjoy it not.

—SHAKESPEARE.

ALL that day the wind raged furiously, but Simon went about his ordinary outdoor occupations in spite of the difficulty, not to say danger, attending them. Miss Belinda was much exercised in her mind because of his early expedition to Liverpool, and also because of his dreamy and preoccupied air.

"If this kind of work goes on," she said to herself, "one of us 'll go silly—as like as not both. My word, my word, to think as that nice little lad should come to be such a softy now he is a man! I have more than half a mind to go and live wi' my Cousin Pringle."

Though Aunt Binney had frequently held the threat over both Simon and his father, she had never so seriously thought of putting it into execution as on this particular windy morning.

"At least Cousin Pringle would have a word to throw to a body now and then," she reflected, "and there would be plenty to do, helpin' her wi' the children and that; and it would hearten up a body, too, to live t'other side of Liverpool and see folks ridin' in and out of town—still, to leave the Farm"—Miss Belinda groaned to herself,

shook her head, and resumed her occupation with a gloomy face.

Simon was silent and queer that morning, and seemed scarce right in's head, but when all was said and done she reckoned he would know when dinner-time came round.

Simon indeed was punctuality itself, and in spite of the turmoil of his thoughts, and the consequent failure of his usually healthy appetite, noon found him wending his way homewards.

The path in front of him was strewn with torn leaves and fragments of branches; as he glanced over the hedge at the orchard, he sighed to see the ground beneath the trees white with fallen bloom. Here and there a riven bough barred his progress for a moment, and the air was full of the wild hurry and screaming of the wind. He was tired of the sound: he wanted breathing space to adjust the thoughts which had been pressing upon him ever since that encounter at early dawn. But it was difficult to be calm amid this disturbance of the elements; moreover, his own frame was still tingling with excitement. Indoors, perhaps, he would be able to find a quiet moment; but before he reached the Farm an incident occurred which threw his soul into even greater confusion.

"Mr. Fleetwood," called a voice. "Simon Fleetwood!"

Amid the skirling of the blast he had not heard rapid footsteps hastening along the path in his wake, and the often-repeated cry which bade him tarry had only now reached his ears.

He wheeled round quickly. A few paces away from him a girl's figure paused, too; the dark cloak thrown over her shoulders ballooning in the wind, the curly tresses loosened, the face flushed, the eyes dancing with eagerness.

"Oh, Mr. Simon, what a race I have had!" cried Rachel. "I thought I should never catch you, you must wear the giant's seven-leagued boots. What strides! and you make no more of the wind than if it were a summer breeze, while I am out of breath. I have been running and screaming for near a quarter of an hour."

Simon hastily retraced his steps, and in a moment stood beside her.

"I am very sorry," he stammered; "I did not hear. Do you want me, Miss Charnock—can I do anything for you?"

There was a pause—the wind blew out the folds of Rachel's cloak, tearing them from her hand so that they flapped round her like great black wings; her slight form stood revealed in its clinging white drapery, her arms in their short sleeves were exposed to the cold, fierce air. Tremblingly Simon put forth his hand to draw the mantle round her, his face paling at his own audacity. One little strand of hair which had been dancing on her brow was now blown right across her face: she was clutching tightly at her cloak and had no free hand wherewith to disentangle herself, and Simon looked and longed, but did not dare. She shook her head like a petulant child and turned a little sideways, thus ridding herself of the silken veil; and Simon breathed easily again, and was glad that he had not succumbed to the temptation. But her next words made him start.

"Do you know," she said in a low tone, so low that he had to bend down to catch the words, "do you know, Simon, why I have run all this way, without any one's knowledge, just to see you? It is because I know all that has happened, and I have come to bid you hope."

There was so dead a silence after this that she turned round again and stole a glance at him. And she saw that in his face which made her start and tremble in her turn.

Simon's nature was a reserved one. He had no more mind to display his feelings than have the generality of Englishmen; but when he was deeply moved he showed it and was not for that reason less of a true man.

"Still waters run deep," the proverb says, but the converse does not always obtain; for though shallow streams brawl and prattle over the pebbles a few inches below their surface, who shall say that the mighty waters of an ocean are silent, or that a river rushes onward without noise? The mariner afloat on the illimitable seas marks how the waters leap highest there, where no man can plumb the depths, and knows that no sound in nature has half the volume of the mere breathing of the deep.

Rachel gave a little gasp.

"Ah, Mr. Simon," she cried, "how you must love her!"

Simon woke from his dream and gazed at her in his turn, first bewildered, then deeply disturbed; then he flushed to the very temples with an odd kind of shame.

"Mr. Fleetwood," said Rachel a little distantly, "I think you are very extraordinary. You must know what I mean—indeed, you have betrayed yourself—but you would, I suppose, keep your secret from me. But let me tell you I know all about it, and will be your friend. Poor Bertha is very unhappy. You know, I suppose, since he was with you last night, that her brother has been called home on urgent business? An express from Liverpool has just come, desiring her to join him there early to-morrow, and she considers herself obliged to obey the summons. It is all a mystery to her, but she thinks—she guesses that it is on her account her brother is anxious to get away from this place. She was inconsolable till I promised to tell you ——"

But here Simon interrupted, with a pleading gesture, though he spoke sternly enough.

"Pray tell me no more! There—there is a mistake."

"But Bertha thinks ——"

"I beg you, Miss Charnock, not to tell me what my Cousin Bertha thinks." He was going red and white by turns, and Rachel felt that he meant what he said. She coloured now with anger and mortification.

"I suppose you consider me very officious—or else you are a changeable person. Do you mean to tell me that you do not love Bertha Gifford?"

Fleetwood was silent for a moment; never had he been in so painful a predicament; had any one but Rachel asked the question he would have curtly declined to answer, but he could not pursue such a course with her; he could not even parry the direct inquiry; yet his modest and kindly soul revolted against the slight he was forced to put upon his little cousin.

"Madam," he said gravely, "since you ask me I must tell you truly that my love for Bertha Gifford is such a love as a man might bestow upon his sister."

"Then I must say I am at a loss to understand your conduct," cried Rachel indignantly. "Bertha does not want to be your sister, nor did your attitude towards her convey the impression that your affection for her was simply brotherly regard. Why did you, may I ask, so often look at her as if you loved her?"

"Did I?" ejaculated Simon, in such evident bewilderment that, in spite of her wrath, Rachel fell a-laughing.

"Why, yes, indeed you did, sir; I for one was certain that you had lost your heart to her."

"I am very sorry," said the yeoman simply; then, as Rachel laughed again, he looked at her inquiringly.

"You are the very oddest man," she cried. "You did, I assure you, and how do you account for it?"

"Why," said Simon, looking at her with those frank, earnest eyes of his, "I have lived such a lonely life, and I—have so little to say to women, that when I saw this pretty creature I admired her, I suppose, and suffered my admiration to be seen. And besides," he added, with a retrospective glance at the scene of that first meeting, "besides, you see, she is so very like my mother; how could I feel otherwise than tenderly towards one who is indeed my own flesh and blood?"

Rachel had stopped laughing and gazed at him reflectively: "Of course you are a kind of hermit," she said, "but it is quite time you came out of the desert. Pray, do you never mean to marry, Mr. Simon?"

In deep confusion the young man stammered that he thought it most unlikely.

"Yet even the mere suggestion makes you blush"; cried Rachel, "I believe you are romantic in your heart." She surveyed him for a moment in silence, while the colour ebbed slowly out of his face, leaving it very pale.

"One thing, however, you have not explained," she continued, with more severity. "How comes it that when I bade you hope, just now, you looked as if the heavens themselves had opened?" The dark eyes shone out from beneath the dancing curls, and there was a long, long silence; and then Simon, looking full at her, said quietly, "I cannot tell you, Miss Charnock".

"I might have saved myself my long run it seems," she returned, gathering her cloak more closely round her and pulling its hood farther down over her face. "But now I must be getting back. There will be such a disturbance if my absence is discovered—in truth it is rash to venture out in this storm—and I assure you the household is already in sufficient confusion. My mother has gone to see Mr. Renshaw ——"

Simon started again.

"To see Mr. Renshaw?" he repeated.

"Yes; is it not dangerous in such weather? I must hasten back before she returns. And my father has had a note from Mr. Gifford, and it has put him into such a temper—but I ought not to speak about my father's temper! And Humphrey is very ill-humoured to-day. All the morning he has been seeking an interview with Bertha, but when Bertha sees him coming she runs out of the room. But now the question is," she pursued in a serious tone, "What am I to say to her? I would she had not known that I was coming to you. I must say I have not seen you. Will you think me very wicked if I tell a fib?"

"I think," he returned seriously, "that it is always better to tell the truth."

Rachel reddened and tossed her head.

"You need not be so greatly scandalised—it is not always possible to tell the truth. Even in the Bible it is made to seem quite right not to tell the truth. Do you remember the story of Rachel? I have always loved it; but I think that Jacob should not have consented to marry Leah."

"Even if Leah loved him?" put in Simon in a low voice. The words broke from him involuntarily, and he had scarcely uttered them ere he blushed again furiously and bit his lip. Rachel blushed too, she knew not why.

"But what am I to say to Bertha?" she repeated, intending to change the subject, and yet feeling in some indefinable way, even as she spoke, that she had better have chosen any other.

Simon uttered a kind of groan.

"Oh, such things should never be spoken of! She should not have known that you were coming to me. You should—not have told me ——"

"Then you would have people pine their lives away

without knowing the truth!" cried Rachel impetuously. "Such things should never be spoken of. What folly! Why, how are people ever to find out that they love each other if they do not speak of it? Can you imagine such a thing, Mr. Fleetwood, as a man being silent when he is in love?"

"I can imagine it very well," he said quietly.

"You disapprove of my having spoken to Bertha?" she inquired.

"I do not like to hear such things discussed," he said gravely.

"Believe me, I shall never meddle with your affairs again, Mr. Fleetwood," she cried, and turning swiftly she ran away, leaving Simon looking after her. Impelled by some unaccountable impulse, Rachel turned at the end of a few yards, and looked back and saw that his face was filled with a curious longing and sorrow, at which she was much puzzled and a little perturbed. Simon's behaviour was altogether unaccountable, and more than once that day she asked herself what could be the meaning of it; but, contrary to her usual custom, she did not discuss the matter with her mother.

That windy day, which began so eventfully for Simon, was destined ere its close to alter the whole course of his life. An hour or two later, after a pretence of dining, he prepared to sally forth once more into the very teeth of the storm, not because any out-door work was possible on such a day, but because, contrary to his anticipations of the morning, he could not brook to sit still in the house. He could not think—he could not rest—his mind was in a fever, his whole soul had risen in revolt.

But even as he stood upon the threshold, buttoning up his coat, a carriage drove with a clatter into the yard, and Madam Charnock descended from it.

Before turning to Simon she desired her coachman to drive home, adding that she would make her way back on foot. Then, giving her hand to the young farmer, she told him hurriedly that she had come to confer with him on a matter of importance.

"Take me, Simon," she added urgently, "to your mother's room; we must be undisturbed."

Miss Binney was safe in the back premises, and would not have been likely to intrude upon them in the oak parlour, but, for greater security, Simon acceded to the lady's request, and ushered her upstairs to the bright tenantless room which held for both of them so many memories. The lady loosened her cloak and threw back her hood; her face was wan and anxious, and Simon marked with regret how prematurely white was the abundant hair, once so raven black. She did not speak for a moment, and his heart which had been beating quicker than its wont ever since his encounter with Rachel, now began to thump violently. After a long pause she turned to him with the keen inquiring glance he remembered of old.

"Simon," she said, "what have you done to your cousin Gifford?"

He hesitated a moment, and then replied, with a glance as keen: "I have fought him, because I deemed him unworthy to be your daughter's husband".

In spite of her anxiety, the lady smiled at the blunt, straightforward speech.

"Pray, Simon," quoth she, "do you intend to select a husband for Rachel, and will you do battle to all the suitors you think unfitting?"

"Far be it from me to interfere in such a matter," he returned in a low voice; "but in this case I think I had a right; he was my kinsman. I would not have one of my own blood do her an injury."

"Then if a good and honourable man came forward, Mr. Fleetwood, you could rejoice in Rachel's happiness?"

"Madam," returned Simon, with eyes upon the ground, "you surely know that I could not rejoice—but I would submit."

She heaved a deep sigh and sank into a chair, leaning her elbow on the table and resting her head upon her hand as though she were weary. After a long silence she dropped her hand and looked at him.

"I know all about it, Simon," she said. "After Mr. Gifford's letter to my husband this morning ——"

"What, did my cousin write to the Squire, Madam?" interrupted Simon with a start. "I thought he meant to keep the matter secret. I thought he had been too proud to own that I had beaten him."

"Oh, he did not own it—you may trust him to preserve his dignity. He wrote to my husband about a—a different affair." She broke off, a faint flush of shame covering her face. Simon averted his eyes.

"I understand," he said hastily; "it will not be necessary to enter into that matter."

"Nay, but unfortunately it is necessary," said Madam Charnock, lifting her head. "Oh, Simon, what use is there in attempting to disguise my sorrow and my shame? I cannot palliate my husband's conduct—I cannot even comprehend it. I can but look on it as a kind of aberration. Were he in his right mind, had it not been for the wretched cares and anxieties which have recently distracted him, he could not have stooped ——" she broke off, covering her face with her hands.

Simon said nothing; he had seen many painful sights in his twenty-seven years; he had even witnessed in the same hour the death of both his parents; yet, in all his days, he had never beheld anything more piteous

than this noble woman facing the revelation of the worthless nature of the man she had sworn to love and honour.

Suddenly a sob broke from her, and she said, wringing her hands, "But Simon, when I think, he is *angry*—angry because his project has failed! Oh God! Gifford's very words should have brought him to his senses. I feel branded by them—they are burnt into my very heart. Listen, this is what he wrote: 'The bargain is off: I have changed my mind. I hope you will find some one equally accommodating.'"

Simon ground his teeth and clenched his hands.

"I would I had not let him off so easily!" he said under his breath.

"Ah, Simon, you did indeed well to protect her. Heaven knows what might have been her fate if you had not interfered! Though, thank God, my child has still one parent to watch over her. While her mother lives no drunken libertine shall call her wife; while her mother lives there shall be no more such 'bargains'. Yet, that it should be so—that I must needs feel I must protect the child against her father!"

She wept a little, silently, and presently wiped her eyes and looked up. "Well, I must make my way back to her. She of course must never know. Do not be so distressed my good Simon—I did not come here to distress you, but to ascertain if my suspicions were correct. I found out part of the truth from Mr. Renshaw—after the letter this morning I felt I could not rest without knowing all. I made him tell me all that took place last night, and all—" her voice faltered—"all that had gone before. I knew so much that he was bound to tell me, and then I guessed that you must in some way have caused this infamous project to fall through. I see I was right. I thank you for your

faithful service to my Rachel." She paused and presently resumed, in an altered tone: "Forget what I have said if you can".

"Madam," said Simon hesitatingly, "I will try to remember only how good the Squire has been to me and mine, and how my father loved and honoured him." There was silence in the room for a little space. Simon's mind wandered back to his childhood, when the Squire's name had been a household word. He remembered how flattered he had been by Mr. Charnock's kindly notice, how he had admired his genial ways, his handsome face. He found it hard to reconcile his boyish idea of the lord of Charnleigh with his present knowledge of the man's ignoble weakness and callousness. It seemed hard to realise that the seeds which had now borne such bitter fruit had been merely dormant in those early days, and had recently been quickened into active growth by self-indulgence and extravagance.

As for Madam Charnock, Simon's words had sent her also travelling back to the past, but she was thinking of another man: a man in very truth—upright, honourable, staunch—Simon's father; and of the woman who had thought herself thrown away upon him at first, and who was afterwards so glad to cling to him and to rejoice in his protecting love. Mrs. Charnock felt a recurrence of the old irritation as she thought of how tardy the awakening had been, how slow this woman had been to realise the existence of her own happiness. The thought suggested another and with a little start she glanced at Simon.

"It pains me, my good friend, that you should waste your young life and your young love. I—I presume that you have not yet conquered your passion for my daughter? I suppose we were mistaken in thinking you cared for Bertha! Ah, why do you doom yourself thus

to loneliness! You are letting the best years of your life slip past, all for a vain fancy."

"You ought to know, madam," replied Simon sternly, "that it is no fancy. But do not let us speak of it. I make no complaint. If you are returning home now," he continued in an altered tone, "let me accompany you to your own gate; the day is still stormy and the roads are rough. You may find your way blocked by fallen trees. Would it not be wiser to remain here quietly, and to allow me to send for your carriage? The short cut through the wood is dangerous."

"No, no, I will walk," she replied hastily. "I must get home quickly; I do not wish my husband to know where I have been. How could we face our lives if he guessed that I knew! I wish to spare him that humiliation. Oh, with what a web of duplicity do we seem to be entangled! Mr. Renshaw is anxious to conceal from him the share you have taken in this business, Simon; and indeed it were as well—the Squire would never forgive you."

He made no reply, and she led the way downstairs.

Outside the world was still storm-ridden, and Simon paced by the lady's side without attempting to speak. She drew her cloak closely about her and bent her head forward, yet could advance but slowly against the driving wind.

Simon stooped towards her: "Will you take my arm, madam?" he asked hesitatingly.

She passed her hand through his arm without replying, and they proceeded, as before, in silence, but a little more rapidly now, for the yeoman's arm was strong, and she was glad of its support. It seemed long before they came to the path which led through the wood, and there Simon once more endeavoured to dissuade her from pursuing it. But she was firm; and he opened the

gate preparing to follow her as she passed through; she turned, however, and faced him; her eyes looked dim beneath the shadow of her hood.

"I need not trouble you to come any farther," she said; "I can find my way quite well from here."

He made no further protest, and she hurried along the narrow path which led beneath the trees. He paused, looking after her, unwilling to leave the spot in his fear lest some accident might befall her. With what wild fury did the wind rush amid those creaking boughs, how easily it might snap them! There, at the edge of the wood, he could see one or two tall saplings laid prone upon the ground; and over his head how the trees rocked, how the boughs swayed! The air was full of a rain of broken twigs and torn leaves—the fresh green of this year mingling with the dry spoil of last autumn, which was caught up and whirled about in brown turbulent eddies. Should he go home, or should he follow the lady at a distance?

Even while he cogitated a sound was borne to him on the very wings of the storm which sought to drown it: a shriek—a woman's shriek. He hastened forward along the path down which she had disappeared, coming all at once to a spot where the trees grew more sparsely, and where, in consequence, the wind had more scope to work its will. There, straight in front of him, he saw a fallen tree, beneath a branch of which Madam Charnock lay prostrate. In a moment Simon was by her side and had drawn her out into the open; there was a purple mark upon her brow, and her eyes were closed. He lifted her, and prepared to carry her out of the wood, for there was danger in every moment they remained there. His heart stood still as he gazed down into the pale face—what if she were already beyond the reach of danger?

A few rapid strides brought him once more to the gate where they had parted, and, having carried her to a safe distance from the wood, he laid her on the bank by the side of the road, fetched water in his hat from the stream hard by, reverently loosened her cloak and hood, and bathed her brow. After a few moments she opened her eyes, and his worst foreboding was dismissed; but her face looked drawn and ghastly, and her faltering words terrified him.

"Simon," she said, "is this death? Oh my God, what will become of Rachel!" The dark eyes, full of unutterable anguish, gazed up into the compassionate face which was bent over her; at that moment it seemed the very embodiment of strength and tenderness. She turned feebly, and clung to Simon's arm.

"I leave her to you," she murmured faintly. "Take her, Simon; promise me to protect her—to take care of her."

"So help me God, I will!" said Simon solemnly.

CHAPTER XV.

I fold to-day at altars far apart,
Hands trembling with what toils? In their retreat,
I seal my love to be.

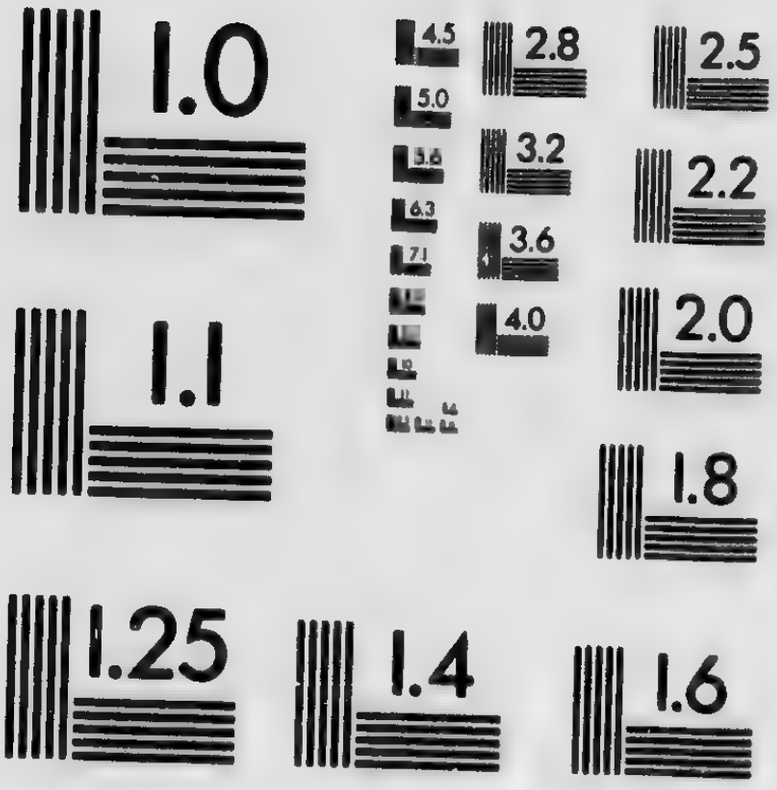
—ALICE MEYNELL.

BUT Madam Charnock did not die. She awoke to consciousness in a quaint panelled room, which she seemed to recognise, but which was certainly not her own. Fa[illegible]ame and went about the great four-post bed, but w[illegible]ther she saw them in a dream or they were realities, she was too drowsy to verify. Now Rachel's face appeared between the curtains, now the Squire's; Miss Belinda's countenance hovered there for a few moments, and was succeeded by that of Purbeck, Mrs. Charnock's own maid. There was a strange man's voice in the room, a strange man's hand upon her brow; it rested on her wrist for a time, and then the room seemed empty again, though Madam Charnock knew that Rachel was sitting behind the curtain at her head. She was conscious all the while of a want, a desire, the nature of which she could not define. She had some great plan in her head, some very important piece of business to transact, but she could not at the time remember what it was. By-and-bye, however, Rachel's pretty face was thrust round the curtain, and bent down so close to her mother that she stretched out a feeble hand and touched it. It was no dream, that was Rachel's cheek, soft and pale and wet—was it with tears? Then all at once Madam Charnock knew what it was she wanted.

"Is Simon there?" she asked faintly.

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"This is Simon's house, Mother dearest, and he is downstairs."

"Ask him to come here."

Rachel looked surprised, but immediately rose, and after a moment or two Simon stood by the bed. Rachel was there, too, a pace or two away.

"Come close, Simon," murmured Madam Charnock; "bend down, I want to ask you something, and I know you will tell me the truth."

She gazed searchingly at his face; its expression was the same as that on which her eyes had closed a little while before—tender, grave, and compassionate.

"Am I dying, Simon?" she whispered earnestly.

"I hope and believe not, madam," he returned, in the same tone. "You have had a bad accident, but the doctor thinks with care you will recover."

"Did I say anything to you just now—when you took me out of the wood?"

"Yes, madam."

"I thought I was dying," she murmured. "That will do; I—I do not want you any more, Simon."

It was well that she closed her eyes then, else she would have seen that on Simon's face which would have disturbed her—a protest, a sudden resolution. But he said nothing, and went quickly out of the room. Miss Belinda was waiting for him on the threshold.

"Simon," she cried in a scandalised tone, "eh Simon, whatever did you go in there for? The for'ardness of it! Why, I wouldn't go in myself now Madam's there; and the Squire turned out by the doctor and all, and her to be kept so quiet! Eh, my gracious goodness, and to think of your walkin' up like that into the lady's room!"

"Madam Charnock sent for me," he returned very quietly.

"Sent for thee, did she? And whatever did she want?"

Simon's lips curled with the rather bitter smile which they had worn once before that day. "I do not think she knows herself, Aunt Binney. The poor lady is wandering, you must remember. She sent for me to say she did not want me."

Downstairs the Squire was standing with his back to the fire—he had called out for a fire when he found the doctor's deliberations would probably be lengthy—speaking in loud cheery tones. He was one of those men who are always in extremes, and now his relief at finding that his wife's accident was not likely to prove fatal had made him forget the agitation and disappointment of the morning. He loved her as much as it was in his nature to love anything, and had passed the most anxious and uncomfortable hours of his life while waiting for the doctor to arrive from Liverpool, but now, in the reaction, his spirits rebounded unnecessarily high. Madam was going to get well at once—she had a splendid constitution, she would be up and about before anybody knew where they were. She would have the best of care and attention at the Farm, he was sure of that. Her own maid was there, moreover, and, as Rachel had set her heart upon staying with her mother, well so she might, for one night at least. Friend Fleetwood would extend his hospitality to her; and Miss Belinda, too, was sure to look after her. He knew that he himself would only be in the way, so he would go back to the Hall presently and appear again in the morning.

Then Mr. Charnock buttoned up his coat, and shook hands warmly with Friend Fleetwood and Miss Belinda, thanking them both heartily for their hospitality, and congratulating Simon on so cleverly coming upon his lady in the very nick of time.

He drove homewards in the best possible spirits, but his exhilaration evaporated all too soon, after his arrival

at Charnleigh Hall, for the servants were irritating enough to go about with gloomy faces, all being sorely anxious about their good mistress. Miss Gifford, moreover, had departed, deeming that her presence would be inconvenient at such a moment, and feeling, once she had been reassured as to the condition of Madam Charnock, almost relieved at the pretext which enabled her to escape from Humphrey. Before she had left the house, however, he had cornered her and made his proposal in due form, receiving to his chagrin and astonishment a scared but determined refusal. He now greeted his uncle with a lowering brow, and the pair sat down to dinner in the very worst of humours. Mr. Charnock bethought him once more of that unaccountable change of opinion of the fellow Gifford, of his own difficulties, and of the fact that he did not know where to turn for £15,000. And Humphrey's meditations were much of the same nature; he, too, had liabilities which he had intended to meet with the fortune accumulated by the late worthy Mr. Gifford during his prosperous commercial career. All had seemed to promise well at first, and the young lady's change of mind was as unaccountable as that of her brother. Not that uncle and nephew confided in each other; the Squire fondly hoped that his intentions were known only to Renshaw, Gifford, and himself; and Humphrey, for his [illegible], was determined to own his recent humiliation to no one, save perchance his cousin Rachel, whom he more than half suspected of bringing it about. He was angry with her on more than one account, and yet he looked forward with an eagerness, not due altogether to his wrath, to the moment which would enable him to take her to task.

Meanwhile Simon, sitting opposite his aunt, was listening absently to her comments on the events of the day. She had been babbling for some little time about

the accident, about the curious coincidence which had brought Simon to Charnleigh Woods just at the right moment—with a digression as to his foolhardiness in hazarding himself upon such a spot in such weather—and had wandered on to speak of the Liverpool physician, of Madam Charnock's maid, of Madam herself; how ghastly she had looked when Simon had carried her in, and how she, Miss Binney, had given her up for dead.

"Eh, when I saw her laid upon the bed where your poor mother died, Simon, it give me a turn—that it did. When I see her white face on the pillow I couldn't but think o' th' other white face as we last see lying there, you and me, my poor lad. Not that your mother's eyes looked same as Madam's—eh, I was fair frightened when Madam opened those great dark eyes, lookin' about her so strange; and her face is dark, too—and your mother's, you know, Simon, was white as a lily. Eh dear, when I think of all we have seen in yon room! 'Twasn't your grandmother's room, you know, Simon; it used to be a spare room; but when your mother came as a bride she fancied it, you see; she reckoned it was prettier nor t'other, and your father couldn't deny her nought, and he had it all done up for her wi' new hangings and a new carpet. Eh, you were born in that room, Simon, and your mother and father died there. Dear o' me! And now Madam Charnock's there, and the young lady. Well, I am sorry as aught should happen to Madam, and I hope, that I do, she'll soon be about again—eh, Simon, it 'ud be terrible, wouldn't it, if she was to die here in our best room?"

Simon's mind had drifted away on what seemed to be a long reverie. He was resting his elbows on the table and his chin upon his hand. His face—as much of it as could be seen—wore a look which rather scandalised

Miss Binney at such a juncture—a kind of inner gladness, a brightness usually foreign to it. He now roused himself with a start:—

"Heaven forbid, my dear Aunt."

"Heaven forbid, indeed, Nephew! And what you are looking so pleased about I am sure I cannot imagine. There is nothing to smile at that I can see. Dear, oh dear, I am fair moidered—I scarce know whether I am on my head or my heels. To think of Madam lyin' yonder in your mother's bed, and Miss Rachel sittin' up by her. Here at the Farm! Doesn't it seem strange!"

"It does indeed," returned her nephew very earnestly, and fell to dreaming again.

By-and-bye his aunt went upstairs, and all the house was still; but Simon sat long by the chimney corner. For now and then some slight sound overhead made him start, and his face would light up and his heart beat. She was here under his roof—in his mother's room. Long a sanctuary of poignant memories—memories so sad that they brought tears even to the eyes of this most manly of men—it had now become filled with a sweetness wholly unalloyed. It enshrined life—fair and young and bright—and Simon, worshipping before it, compassed it about with his own hopes and a secret palpitating joy.

That day a double revelation had come to him; his brief conversation with Rachel had shown her to him in a new light. He knew her now to be no angel, but he loved her the more for being what she was: half child, half woman; one who had not yet cast away the follies of the irresponsible age, and in whom the incipient foibles of womanhood were dawning. She was no star to be adored from afar, to shine remorselessly over a man's head all his days; her light was rather of

the homely order, which might twinkle on his hearth, giving forth warmth and radiance in proportion as he approached it. He had felt her to be nearer to him then, and her mother's words a few hours later had placed her actually within his grasp. Simon's heart bounded as he thought of those words: "I leave her to you, take her". It was characteristic of the man that he set aside completely the subsequent withdrawal of them. With him there was no going back upon a promise, and he would not condone another's breach of faith. He was gentle, tolerant, forgiving, both by nature and training, but there was a limit to his forbearance, and even had the matter not touched him so deeply, he would not have permitted any one with whom he had to deal to draw back after having gone so far.

His resolution was settled, therefore, and his plan of action determined; he would hold Madam Charnock to her word. And for the rest, what difficulties could he not overcome, what feats could he not accomplish to win sweet Rachel's love? Once secure of the right to woo her on an equal footing, how could he fail to make her love him, seeing that he loved her so much, and that there was nothing in all the world that he would not do for her sake?

All at once he rose and crossed the room to the bookcase in the corner, taking from the lowest shelf the great family Bible, the fly-leaves of which contained crabbed records of the births, marriages, and deaths of so many generations of Fleetwoods. But Simon did not pause to consider these entries now; he turned the pages rapidly until he came to that on which was set forth the story which Rachel loved so well—the story of her namesake. He read it slowly through, breaking off now and then to lean back in his chair and meditate with a smiling face. Closing the book at last, he

replaced it on the shelf, and then paused, listening to the sound of footsteps overhead. When all was still again he murmured half aloud, "There shall be no Leah, my sweet!" Then suddenly throwing up his arms, he prayed earnestly: "God, my God, give her to me!"

CHAPTER XVI.

So on he fares, and to the border comes,
Of Eden.

—MILTON.

MRS. CHARNOCK'S constitution was, as her husband said, an excellent one; she soon rallied from the shock, and her injuries proved for the most part to be mere contusions. It was not, however, considered safe to move her for some days; and meanwhile Rachel came and went, bringing light and hope with her, as Simon often thought. Every tone of her voice thrilled him; he listened for the sound of her foot; he came back to the house a dozen times a day merely because she was there. At night he would stand beneath the window of the room where she slept beside her mother, gazing at the little twinkling light, mind and heart absorbed in a voiceless prayer of rejoicing and thanksgiving.

At last the time came for them to return to the Hall, and, with many expressions of gratitude for their kindness and hospitality, Madam Charnock took leave of him and his aunt. She was careful not to be one moment alone with Simon, and even in saying farewell she scarcely dared to look him in the face. But as he attended her to the carriage she stole a glance at him, half expecting to find his features convulsed with despairing grief. But no such expression was there; his face was calm and even placid; yet when his eyes, attracted by her gaze, were turned upon her she read there something which frightened her—not anger, not even reproach, but steady determination.

During the next few days a period of calm seemed to succeed the blissful unrest of the preceding week. The inhabitants of the Hall gave no sign, and Simon, often as he walked abroad, heard no news of them, save that Mr. Humphrey had departed. One afternoon, however, he resolved to take decided action for himself, and rode into the town to pay a visit to Mr. Renshaw. He found that gentleman poring with knitted brows over a pile of papers, and was received by him with anything but cordiality.

"Well, sir," began the old lawyer as soon as the door closed behind Simon, "a pretty kettle of fish has come of your interference! You have made a nice mess of it yonder, and got me in a deuced awkward corner."

Simon smiled, not at the variety of metaphors, but at his own thoughts, and sat down unconcernedly.

"Now, Mr. Renshaw," he said, "you must explain yourself. Since you have said so much, you must say more. What is the real state of affairs at the Hall?"

"Upon my soul, Simon Fleetwood, I find it hard to tell you. Affairs at the Hall are in a very bad way indeed, sir. Everything is entangled—turned topsy-turvy, I may say. And just as there seemed to be a way out of the difficulties you must put a finger in the pie. Confound you, what business have you to interfere? What is it to you whom the young lady marries—or who pays court to her, let us say, with a hope of marriage? Why couldn't you at least have held your tongue until the papers were signed? Twenty-four hours would have done it."

"How did you find out that I had anything to say to it?" inquired Simon.

"Pooh, do you take me for an owl? You carry off the young man over night, and he changes his mind the next morning. After being as keen about the business

as a man could be, he veers round and says he will have nothing to do with it. Some influence must have been brought to bear upon him, and he was subjected to none but yours. You need not deny it, sir."

"I do not deny it. Is the Squire aware of my part in the matter?"

"Is the Squire aware!" repeated the old lawyer, throwing himself back in his chair and rubbing his nose with every appearance of irritation. "No, sir, thank Heaven, he is not aware. I have kept the matter from him for my own sake. You have played a confounded unfriendly trick on me, young fellow. I thought you were getting me out of a mess when I allowed you to carry away your cousin, but, egad, you have got me into a far greater one. The Squire," said Mr. Renshaw, leaning forward and shaking his head solemnly, "is neither to hold nor to bind, Simon Fleetwood, and upon my soul I am sorry for him. Do you know, man, that we shall have the bailiffs in the Hall before we have done? Aye, unless something short of a miracle happens, the place will be gutted of pictures, library, everything, in short, that is not entailed."

"Can he not raise the money elsewhere, then?" inquired the yeoman.

"My dear sir, money is not easy to raise when you have mortgaged your property almost up to the hall door, and overdrawn at the bank until the bankers themselves have come down upon you. That is the difficulty, you see. Who'd advance money on the Charnleigh property now? No one that I know of, even at a ruinous rate of interest; and, let me tell you, Mr. Charnock is already so hampered that he would have found it extremely difficult to pay Gifford the six hundred pounds odd, which would have been due to him annually at the very moderate rate of interest that I arranged."

"Yes, I can well believe it," returned Simon meditatively. "The estate to begin with is shockingly mismanaged—I can see it for myself. That great Home Farm which Mr. Charnock keeps in his own hands, why most of the best land is suffered to lie fallow ——"

"For the good reason," put in Mr. Renshaw, "that there is no money to work it with. For the same cause there is scarcely a head of stock upon it."

"Well," said Simon, looking fixedly at his old friend, "I came here this morning, Mr. Renshaw, to make a proposal to you on this very subject. I know a way of getting the Squire out of his difficulties."

"Do you indeed?" replied the lawyer sarcastically. "I always knew you to be a wiseacre, Simon. Well, let us hear what you propose."

"Simply this: that you go straightway to Mr. Charnock, and tell him you have found a person ready to take up the mortgage dropped by Mr. Gifford, on the same terms."

The lawyer started, gasped, and slowly rubbed his hands. "And the name of this person is ——?" he inquired after a pause.

"The name of this person is Yeoman Fleetwood."

Mr. Renshaw rose and came close to him. "Are you in earnest?"

"I am most thoroughly in earnest. You can tell the Squire that it was I who dissuaded Edward Gifford from completing the arrangement originally agreed to, and that in consequence I proposed to take his place."

"My dear lad, why should I tell him that? He will be so angry at your interference that it—it may prevent his taking advantage of your offer."

"I do not think so," replied Simon. "Besides it is necessary for many reasons that he should know. How

else could you account for my being aware of his contact with Gifford?"

"Why, your cousin might have told you, you know," replied the lawyer. "As a matter of fact, he did tell you. Oh, I could have found some explanation which would have been quite satisfactory."

"I prefer the Squire to know the truth," returned the young man firmly. "Let me know what he says, and tell him, if he considers my proposal, I will discuss further details with him in person."

"You said, I believe, Simon, you were willing to agree to the same terms as those originally laid down?" said Mr. Renshaw with a sidelong glance at him. "Four per cent, you know, and there will be hard work to find that. By George, you take me by surprise. I knew you to be a man of substance, but I scarcely thought that you had £15,000 on hand to throw about so lightly."

"To throw about, Mr. Renshaw?" repeated Simon in affected surprise. "Surely this is an investment?"

"Oh, yes, yes, an investment of course—a—a very fair investment, Simon. You are a good fellow to seek to help us out of our difficulties, but upon my soul, I do not know what you do it for. Come, I was your father's friend and legal adviser, and so I tell you frankly that this is a risky affair—very risky, and—and though you did spoil that little plan of ours, and I was very much annoyed with you, very much annoyed indeed, you are not on that account bound to make the deficit good. There! now I have eased my conscience. Remember you will most certainly never see your principal again, and as for your interest, it will be an uncertain quantity."

"My good old friend," said Simon shaking him by the hand, "I understand the case very well. Now that you have said your say to me, tell me when will you say mine to the Squire?"

"Why, this evening," cried Mr. Renshaw. "Since you are bent on going on with the affair we cannot set about it too quickly. I will drive over to the Hall this very hour, and will call at the Farm on my way back. You are absolutely determined, Simon?"

"Absolutely determined."

The lawyer shook hands with him again, his face, now that his conscientious scruples were finally set at rest, wearing an expression of joyful relief. Simon took up his hat, and rode off, well content.

A few hours later Mr. Renshaw's chaise drove up to the Farm, and the old man was ushered into the parlour. Miss Belinda was established in her usual chair, busily knitting, while waiting for Simon to return for supper. She welcomed the visitor cordially, pressed him to stay and share the evening meal, and seemed much astonished at his abstracted manner.

"Simon will be in in a minute," she announced; "he said we was to send him word if any one came, but I did not know he expected you; he might have told me, I think, but a body 'ud fancy that Simon's words were gold and silver, he is that careful of them. I'd have had a bit of somethin' extra for supper if I'd ha' known you was comin', Mr. Renshaw."

"I can only stay a few minutes, Miss Belinda, indeed. Simon is outside, you say? If you will tell me where he is I will go to him. I have just come to see him on —on a little matter of business."

"Is Simon thinkin' of makin' his will?" inquired the lady with her head on one side. "I always told him 'twas a thing I'd be seein' to. Why, if he was to die to-morrow the money 'ud have to be divided, I am told, between the next o' kin; and Cousin Pringle 'ud be puttin' in for her share—her as is right well off a'ready, and nobbut first cousin once removed to Simon. There s

folks as is nearer to Simon nor that, it is to be hoped—them as has brought him up."

"To be sure, to be sure," agreed the lawyer, chuckling to himself at the notion of the white-haired woman's prudent foresight. Truly the contingency seemed remote enough that she should survive her stalwart nephew.

"Simon is in the barn yon," pursued Miss Belinda, "but you cannot be carryin' ink and paper out there."

"I do not require either, thank you, ma'am. In the barn, you say? I'll just step across to him."

Simon's men had been threshing that day, but now work was over, and the barn was empty of all save the master. He was gazing about him pensively enough when Mr. Renshaw entered.

"I have seen the Squire," began the lawyer, looking round with a cautious glance, and button-holing his young friend. "I have seen him, and told him that you are ready to advance the money. I just mentioned incidentally that your cousin had incautiously let drop that he was lending money on mortgage on the Charnleigh estate. The Squire frowned, I promise you, Simon, and banged the table with his fist—'I'll be bound, Renshaw,' says he, 'Fleetwood has been running down the property—letting out that at this moment it is not in a profitable condition. Hang it, sir,' says he, 'I believe that fellow Fleetwood was the cause of Gifford's throwing up the affair.'"

"Well," interrupted Simon impatiently, "there was your opportunity. Did you not seize it?"

The old man looked at him somewhat shamefacedly. "Upon my soul, Fleetwood, when the Squire's in that mood I do not like to argue with him. He is an unreasonable man, and never can be got to see matters in the right light, and, my dear lad, I must own to you that I think your share in this affair looks peculiar, very

peculiar indeed. It is, I may say, incomprehensible to me. Well," he pursued, "Mr. Charnock next asked me if I imagined you had any ulterior motive in putting a spoke in this wheel of his. Did you think, forsooth, to get any of his land into your hands—I vow the language he used then made my very hair stand on end. Or could you merely have interfered from paltry jealousy of your cousin, with whom, it is said, you had ever been on unfriendly terms—or, in short, what could have been your motive? I told him—what I tell you now, lad—that, upon my word, your motive is a mystery to me. I added, however, that you had made a very fair—indeed, a most extraordinarily generous—offer, and that I should think him a fool—I believe I put the matter a little more respectfully, but the sense was the same—if he did not accept it. After a pause he calmed down, considered for a while silently, and finally desired me to send you to him without delay. So you must wait upon him this evening, Simon."

"Very good," replied the yeoman. "I will not fail to do so."

"I would I knew your object," mused the lawyer, as he crossed the yard again. "It cannot be the young lady, that is certain; and, much as you and yours have loved the Charnocks, I doubt if the mere quixotic wish to help the family is strong enough for such a step as this."

"It is very strong," put in Simon quietly.

"Then, deuce take it, this business with your cousin; you do not love him, I can see—why then interfere?"

"You can conceive perhaps," returned the other, "that I may have a sufficiently strong sense of family responsibility to desire to prevent one of my own kin from bringing disgrace and unhappiness into a family which I honour."

"Is that the explanation?" cried the lawyer, turning round with a disgusted face; "upon my soul, I did not think you would have been so foolish." He clicked his tongue against his teeth and shook his head. "Very insufficient, Simon, very insufficient; it was evidently not from your side of the family that the young fellow Gifford took his shrewdness. Pooh! Pooh! A rubbishy tale, a very flimsy excuse, young man. Let me tell you," he added sternly, pausing with his foot on the step of the chaise, "I do not for one moment believe it, Simon Fleetwood."

An hour later Simon was ushered into the small study or office where the Squire usually conducted matters of business. Mr. Charnock had drawn his high elbow-chair close to the table, which faced the door, and looked up as he entered. A fine man still, though his years were close upon seventy; his features clear-cut and handsome, yet bearing the stamp of long self-indulgence. He fixed his eyes upon the young man, as he advanced into the room, with a searching and somewhat haughty gaze.

"Sit down, Mr. Fleetwood," pointing to a chair at a little distance.

Simon obeyed.

"Mr. Renshaw has told me of this proposal of yours. Before I consider it, however, I should like to understand your motive for making it."

"My motive, sir," replied Simon, "chiefly concerns myself. Surely if we consider the proposal it will be sufficient."

Mr. Charnock leaned back in his chair, looking at him in astonishment; after a moment's pause he said:—

"Let us first, as you suggest, examine the proposal. I confess Mr. Renshaw did not make its nature altogether clear to me."

"Indeed, sir? I am surprised at that, for my instruc-

tions to Mr. Renshaw were very simple. I requested him to announce to you my willingness to take up the mortgage refused by my cousin, on terms possibly more advantageous to yourself."

"Let us hear these terms," said the Squire. In his pressing difficulties he could not afford to follow his natural impulse, which would have been to send this presumptuous young man promptly about his business; but it was agony to him to discuss his own affairs with one so much his inferior. His brows were still drawn together, and he tapped his foot lightly as Simon spoke.

"I take it, Mr. Charnock, that you have at this moment great need of £15,000, and that the only security you can offer in return for the advancement of this large sum is a property already heavily encumbered—a property, in fact, so mismanaged that it brings in little profit."

"If you please, Mr. Fleetwood," interrupted the Squire with asperity, "we will not discuss the management of my property."

"With all apologies," returned Simon, "I must beg you to listen to me, sir—it is, unfortunately, impossible to state my case without alluding to the present management of your estate. You proposed, I believe, to pay my cousin Gifford four per cent on the sum advanced by him, but I think you must know, Mr. Charnock, that it would be very difficult indeed to draw this sum from an estate upon which there are already so many claims. My proposal would therefore be this: to advance £15,000 on the same terms as those agreed to by my cousin Gifford, and, in addition, to take over—with your permission—the control of such lands as have hitherto remained in your hands. Your estate joins mine: I would work the two together; my outlay for stock, labour, and other such expenses could gradually be refunded, and

the interest due on the mortgage could be suffered to stand over until the property was in a condition to pay it. All profits over and above—and I hope in course of time, that such profits would be considerable—would revert to you, sir."

By this time Mr. Charnock had forgotten all about his dignity, and was leaning forward, gazing intently, almost incredulously, at the yeoman.

"My dear fellow," he said in an altered tone, "this is indeed an extraordinary proposal. I do not even understand it."

"I am sorry," said Simon; "I had thought that I made my meaning clear." He thereupon repeated the offer in very nearly the same words, laying further stress on the advantages it must afford Mr. Charnock.

"And do you mean to say, Simon, that you on your part would be content to derive no other benefit from this transaction than the very moderate sum you propose to charge as interest?"

"Sir," replied Fleetwood, "four per cent is a very reasonable rate of interest—the investment is a fair one. If you wish me, at some future time, to pay myself back the principal little by little out of the property at my disposal, I have no doubt it could be done. But let us be open with each other; I want more than this. If you agree to this arrangement, you must understand that I, for my part, expect you to make the same terms with me as with my cousin Gifford. Precisely the same terms," he added, looking steadily at the other.

The Squire rose from his chair with an oath. "What do you mean?" he thundered.

"What I say," replied Simon, rising too and gazing at him unflinchingly. "I demand the same advantages agreed upon in my cousin's case—all the advantages—yet not quite all," he added, dropping his voice, "for I

would have no undue favour shown to me, I would not have the slighest pressure put upon your daughter ——"

"How dare you, sir!" cried Mr. Charnock fiercely. "How dare you, Farmer Fleetwood, bring my daughter's name into this business? How dare you so much as lift your eyes to her?"

"Sir, I dare what my cousin has dared before me—without presumption, I may say it—less worthy than I. I take this opportunity because it is the only way that is opened to me. Hereditary prejudices cut me off from her: I seize any and every chance which can bring me to her level."

"You cur," growled the Squire, "the base advantage you would take of my straits does not make you the more a gentleman. Do you think I would sell my daughter to a common farmer?"

"What is this?" cried a voice from the door, and at that moment Madam Charnock entered, her dark eyes blazing, her face pale. "What is this, Mr. Charnock? What do I hear you say? Simon what have you come for?"

"Madam," said Simon, "my love for your daughter has been no secret to you, you know how I have striven against it, and with what ill-success. Of late I resolved to strive no more—for I think that such a love must come from God; but, situated as I am, how can it be other than hopeless if I do not take decided steps to remove the barriers between us? I want to meet her on equal terms, to be allowed to approach her, to take my chance of advancing in her favour—such a chance as would be given to any other man, but which has hitherto been denied to me because I am a yeoman. Now, madam, my father was a yeoman too, but my mother was a happy wife. I want, as I say, the same opportunities that would be given to any other man,

and since they are not open to me, I have resolved, if possible, to make them. I came here to-day to propose to relieve the Squire from certain of his pressing difficulties, on condition of his consenting to receive me as a suitor for his daughter's hand."

"Did you ever hear such impertinence?" cried the Squire. "Such audacity! What does the fellow take me for?"

The lady crossed the room slowly, her silken draperies trailing as she walked, until she stood close to Simon.

"I did not think," she said reproachfully, "that you would stoop to this. I am surprised—disappointed."

"I wonder, madam," said Simon, gazing at her unflinchingly but speaking in a low voice, "that you should be surprised. I have your promise and I hold you to it."

"Ah!" she cried under her breath, and throwing up her hands in protest, "you should not take advantage of me thus—you should be too honourable, too manly. I spoke wildly in my anguish and fear; you should take account of the circumstances."

"I do take account of them," he returned. "When should a woman speak her mind if not in what she thinks to be her dying hour? When you deemed you had but a few moments to live, you gave your daughter into my care. The danger is past, but I have not for that become unworthy of the trust; I have taken it up and will hold to it."

"What's all this? What are you muttering there?" cried the Squire. "Does he think I will allow the wooing of our child to be a matter of sale or barter?"

"Husband," said Madam Charnock, suffering her hands to drop by her side, "I fear me he knows that her name has been trafficked with already, and with one far less deserving. But Simon," she added, again turning

reproachfully towards him, "I did not think that *you* would follow the same course."

"Madam," said Simon firmly, "I come to Rachel's parents in the same mood as that in which Jacob of old entered into bondage with Laban. I will serve her father for seven years and more, if he will but agree—not to give her to me, for I would have her come to me of her own free will—but to give me access to her. I will work for her. I do not doubt but that in time my faithful service and my great love must win her."

There was a long silence in the room. The Squire, overcome at the revelation of his wife's knowledge of the previous transaction, had no words at his disposal, while Madam Charnock contemplated the tall commanding figure which confronted her so steadily. In its simplicity, its strength, its earnestness of purpose, it did, indeed, recall those biblical figures, which are to be revered throughout all time because so closely in touch with God, to be loved because so human.

With characteristic courage and single-mindedness, Simon had availed himself of the plan of action originally drawn up by his cousin; and the scheme which had seemed vile when proposed by Edward Gifford, had quite another aspect in Simon's hands. To the slime of the earth the Creator in wrath and scorn condemned the serpent, yet of this same slime He made man to His own image and likeness. Even thus our human works—imperfect at the best—are to be judged by the spirit which actuates them. They do not stand by themselves, but bear in some measure the impress of the originator; that which is ignoble in the hands of one man may be uplifted by another's personality into something lofty and pure.

She stood silent and abashed, and Simon turned to the Squire.

"Will you entertain my proposal?" he said quietly, though his voice trembled. "No, do not answer me now. Think it over, and give me my reply to-morrow—when you will. I am content to wait as long as it seems good to you."

"Tush!" cried Mr. Charnock irritably, "the matter is one which must be decided at once. If I cannot agree to your terms, Fleetwood, I must needs raise the money somewhere else. But, d—— me! I think there is a great to-do about nothing." He threw himself back in his chair with a laugh. "Simon here, it seems, is struck with our Rachel's bonny face—well, any man might be that, be he prince or ploughman—and he begs leave to court her in due form. Pshaw! it is like a fairy tale. In fairy tales, it seems, even the beggar may hope to win the princess; but it is not so easy in real life. As for that nonsense about Jacob and Laban, which seems to have struck you dumb, madam, the Devil himself can quote scripture, we all know that. I think the girl herself has too nice a sense of what is fitting ever to consent to receive advances from you, Yeoman Fleetwood. But since you state so roundly that you would have no pressure put upon her—since, in point of fact"—here the Squire waved his hand—"you commit me to nothing beyond the mere recognition of your position as a suitor, I am willing to meet you so far. But it must be understood"—he drew his bushy white brows together—"that I promise nothing. I encourage no hopes. When she sends you packing about your business, Simon Fleetwood, you must not blame me."

"Sir," replied Simon quietly, "I place my hope in God and in my great love."

"Remember," pursued the Squire, still frowning fiercely, "the girl must know nothing of this. Do you hear, madam? You must give me your word, both of you,

not to speak of this matter to any living soul—not even to Renshaw," he added quickly.

"There is no necessity whatever for Mr. Renshaw to know anything about it," replied the young man. "For the rest, I give my word the more willingly because I would not for worlds Miss Charnock should consider herself under any obligation to me."

Mr. Charnock crossed his legs, and looked critically at Simon. After a pause he said carelessly:—

"Well then, we may consider the rest of the business settled, I presume? We must have Renshaw's assistance for that. The deeds of mortgage must be drawn up at once; and with regard to that other plan of yours, Fleetwood, about taking over the management of the Home Farm, why I have no objection to your trying. Things could not well be worse for me, and you might improve them."

"I hope," put in Madam Charnock anxiously, "that Simon is not committing himself rashly to an undertaking which might be prejudicial to his own interests."

"Trust him for that," returned her lord hastily. "Yeoman Fleetwood is shrewd enough; are you not, Simon? *He* will look after himself. The investment is a good one, madam. Four per cent., certain, is not to be sneezed at, is it, Simon? And for the rest, I have no doubt he will make his profit. Fleetwood is a knowing fellow—mark how things have prospered with him. Yes, yes," said the Squire, nodding and smiling quite graciously on the young man. "We may expect him to do wonders now that he has so vast a field at his disposal."

Simon smiled quietly, amused at the characteristic change of manner. The Squire's spirits were now rapidly rising, and his good humour had already returned. It pleased him to assume this jocular tone and to divert

himself with the fiction that Fleetwood had done rather a neat stroke of business for himself, and that any sense of obligation or expression of gratitude on his own part would be, therefore, quite out of place.

"I do not understand," said Madam Charnock dubiously. "What is this management of which you are speaking?"

"Tush, my dear, of course you do not understand. Ladies never understand business matters, and should not meddle with 'em. Fleetwood is going to be my manager for a time, or shall I say my tenant? He expects to improve my property vastly, and to make quite a little fortune for himself. Well, good-night, good-night; call with Renshaw to-morrow, and we shall make final arrangements."

Simon took the proffered hand, and then turned to the lady. She was still looking at him anxiously and doubtfully, but she, too, stretched out her hand.

"Simon, Simon, this is a mad venture. You have staked high; what will happen if you lose?"

"Madam," said Simon, bowing reverently over her hand, "I mean to win."

CHAPTER XVII.

Ye little birds that sit and sing
Amidst the shady valleys,
And see how Phillis sweetly walks
Within her garden alleys,
Go, pretty birds, about her bower,
Sing, pretty birds, she may not lower.
Ah me! methinks I see her frown:
Ye pretty wantons, warble.
—THOMAS HEYWOOD.

A LITTLE before noon one sunny morning, shortly after Simon's interview with the Squire, Rachel Charnock was walking briskly through one of the plantations which abutted on the park. Everything was bright and fresh and gay this April day, and Rachel, as she walked, sang to herself for pure blitheness of heart. The trees had recovered their recent severe usage by the wind, and seemed to have decked themselves afresh with tenderest green; and the flowers beneath, laid flat by the storm, now sprang up gaily once more. The double daffodils were gone, indeed, but here were the Lent lilies, with airy wings outspread, and golden cups shining as though filled with flame; here was the celandine, a very shower of stars; and there were actually primroses in bud, and forget-me-nots in full bloom.

Rachel loved the old place, with that clinging, intimate fondness which is given only to the first home; the familiar outlines of tree and hedgerow were to her as the features of a friend; a broken branch, an unexpected gap, each was to her a disfigurement to be lamented over; she gazed on them with a little shock of dis-

appointment as one might mark the wrinkles in a beloved face.

One may, therefore, imagine her surprise and indignation when, on emerging from the woods, she found that a very great change, indeed, was about to take place in one portion of the park. A long brown line already clove the dewy green as far as her eye could reach, and travelling slowly towards her was a two-horse plough, while in the distance its double was at work.

She stopped short, catching her breath; then hurried forward with flashing eyes to inquire further into this unprecedented state of affairs. To plough up the park! Had such a thing ever been heard of before in the annals of Charnleigh? What desecration! What humiliation! Had the family, indeed, sunk so low as this? Why, the Charnocks might as well be farmers at once. To have ploughed land within a stone's throw, as one might say, of the windows of the Hall; to permit the gardens and shrubberies, so carefully laid out, to open on such a prospect as a field of turnips or potatoes! It was not to be borne; her father must certainly be unaware of it, else the cheerfulness which had been restored to him during the last few days would assuredly have taken wing once more. The stupid old steward had evidently made some grievous blunder, and it behoved Rachel to see that the mistake was rectified without delay.

While these thoughts were flitting through her brain, she was hastening with all speed in the direction of the nearest ploughman; and as soon as she was within earshot she raised her voice peremptorily, "Stop! stop!"

The man stared but continued to advance; and it was not until she had repeatedly admonished him that, uttering the monosyllable "Haw!" in a stentorian voice, he brought his horses to a standstill. To Rachel's surprise the face, which the old fellow turned upon her, was

perfectly unknown to her: it belonged, indeed, to no less a person than Bill Lupton, Simon Fleetwood's head-man.

"What are you doing?" cried Rachel breathlessly.

Bill first pointed with his horny forefinger at the furrow in front of him, and then jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"We're agate o' ploughing up this here bit o' land," he replied mildly.

Rachel flushed with anger. That Charnleigh Park, the object of reverence not only to herself, but to all the country round, should be stigmatised as "a bit o' land!" She positively stamped her foot as she returned:—

"Nay, but such a thing is not to be thought of. There must be some mistake. Who are you, to begin with? I do not know your face. Who told you to come here with your plough?"

Bill gazed at her, momentarily overpowered by the torrent of questions; then he took off his battered hat, scratched his head thoughtfully, and put it on again. Finally he decided to answer the last query, seeing that it bore the most directly on the point. "Why, my mester towd me."

"Do you mean that the Squire knows what you are about?"

"Naw, I never heerd nought about Squire. 'Twere our mester as towd me to coom."

"You are raving, man!" cried Rachel, tapping her foot again. "What do you mean by your master? Who is your master?"

Bill gave a toothless grin of derision at her ignorance.

"Eh! my mester's wan most folks know pretty well. My mester's Fleetwood o' th' Farm."

"Oh, indeed!" said the girl in an altered tone. She paused for a moment, but continued with renewed exasperation, "And what business, may I ask, has Yeoman

Fleetwood to give orders at Charnleigh? You make some great mistake, my man. Mr. Fleetwood doubtless intended you to set to work on some of his own land."

"Nay, nay," returned Bill, shaking his head with a kind of contemptuous compassion. "Our mester's none o' th' kind as 'ud leave their own ploughing to this time o' day. Why, we are half-way through Aperl. 'Yigh' he says hissel', ''tis late enough—too late to get agate o' this here job. But,' says he, 'we mun do th' best we can. The ground 'ull be ready for autumn as how it is, and we'll get the taters in early.' Yigh, that were what he said. He coom here this morn and marked out the bit we was to turn up, me and Jock, and says he, 'Get agate now as soon as ever you can'."

"But I do not understand," exclaimed Rachel, more and more exasperated. "Did the Squire give leave, I say? Does my father know of this monstrous piece of work?"

"Nay, I know nought about the Squire," repeated Bill placidly. "My orders is fro' my mester—I dunnot tak' no orders fro' nobry nobbut him. I reckon he's gaffer here now."

The girl's eyes positively blazed, but with a great effort she managed to contain her wrath.

"We shall see about that," she said coldly. "I will report the matter to Mr. Charnock, and meanwhile you must not continue this business until he authorises you."

By this time the other plough had reached the limit marked out for it, turned, and come slowly down the field again, being now about twenty paces away. Its progress was marked by a thin brown strip parallel to that already traced by Bill. The last-mentioned old man, after gazing at Rachel for a moment or two in perplexity, turned towards his comrade, put his hand over his mouth and called to him lustily to "hold on a

bit". Jock obeyed, and, leaning on the handle of his plough, looked round inquiringly.

"What's to do?" he shouted.

"Young lady says we mun give ower," returned Bill.

Jock took off his hat, scratched his head as his partner had done, and looked up at the sky for inspiration. None coming, however, he dallied with the puzzle instead of finding an answer to it.

"*Who* says we mun give ower?"

"Why this here young lady—Mistress Charnock, I believe 'tis."

Here Bill gave a deprecating pull at his ragged grey forelock.

Once more Jock gazed heavenwards for direction; then he looked at Bill.

"Well, owd lad, our mester, thou knows, our mester said we was to get th' job done. That were what our mester said. 'Get agate, lads,' says he—didn't he, Bill?"

"Ah!" said Bill, "them was the very words he said, Jock."

Both men looked at Rachel, and then Jock prepared to move on.

"Stop!" cried Rachel imperiously. "I will not allow it, I tell you; I will not have the place ruined without my father's consent. Wait here at least until I fetch him. I am certain he knows nothing about it."

Bill looked at Jock, and Jock looked once more at the sky. At the third trial inspiration did actually come, for, on bringing his eyes down once more to the level of his fellow-labourer's, he remarked briskly: "Well, 'tis just upon dinner-time, as how 'tis. I dunnot reckon as th' gaffer made no mistake, but we met as well make sure on't. Let's goo we're ways awhoam now, mon, and ax him."

"Yigh, we met do that," agreed Bill. "I see nought

agin it, and it wunnot waste no time; for we mun get awhoam for we're mate, as how 'tis."

With many objurgations the great sleek horses were unfastened from the ploughs and led away, the brass mounting of the harness gleaming in the sun, and the chains clanking, across the park towards the village. The ploughs, however, remained, each midway in its own furrow; testifying, as Rachel thought in bitterness of spirit, to the ignominy which had come upon her ancestral lands.

Her heart seemed to burn within her as she hastened homewards, and her eyes filled with angry tears. There must be a mistake, surely; and yet the old labourers both seemed convinced of their right to carry out the task. What was it the man had said? "I reckon our mester's gaffer here now." Yeoman Fleetwood master at Charnleigh! Impossible! Nevertheless, the announcement had been made with assurance, and a dim foreboding began to take possession of the girl. She knew her father was in difficulties—were things so bad as this? For the moment her feeling towards Simon was something closely akin to hatred.

She found Mr. Charnock in his study, perusing the *Morning Post* with evident good humour and satisfaction.

"Father," she cried, going up to him eagerly, and speaking in trembling tones, "Father, do you know they are ploughing up the park?"

Mr. Charnock removed his eye-glasses and looked up in evident displeasure.

"My dear Rachel," he cried testily, "I wish you would not burst in on one like that—it is most unbecoming in a young woman of your years. They are ploughing up the park, do you say? Let 'em plough it up, if they like—I daresay the park wants ploughing?"

"But, sir," pleaded the girl, tears of mortification now standing on her cheeks, "surely it is not by your wish that the place is thus disfigured? I believe it was not done by your orders."

"Never mind whose orders they were. If it has got to be done it must be done—that is all."

"Pray forgive me, Father, if I seem importunate! But, indeed, sir, I should like to know if it be true that Simon Fleetwood is master here now?"

"Simon Fleetwood master!" repeated the Squire, now thoroughly roused, and speaking in an altered tone. "Master? Certainly not! Nothing of the kind. What put such a preposterous idea into your head, girl?"

"Why, sir, there are two strange labourers there with a plough, and they have already made two furrows across the park—the furrows look vastly ill, I can assure you—and, when I inquired their authority for such a proceeding, they informed me that they had received orders from Mr. Fleetwood. And one of them remarked that he thought Fleetwood was master here, now."

"Pooh! Nonsense! You should not talk to such people, Rachel," returned the Squire, sinking back into his chair. "Fleetwood has taken over the Home Farm, and, in fact, the management of the estate for the present. I am not just now equal to looking into affairs for myself—therefore, I have come to an arrangement with him."

"Have you let the park to him then, sir? Do you mean that he is your tenant? Or am I to understand that he is now your steward? And what is to become of Woodham?"

"Why, what a plague! You weary me with these questions, child. 'Tis nothing to you under what capacity Simon appears on the premises. It's enough for you to know that I am fully aware of what is going on, and

can manage my own business. Now, go to Mamma, and do not let me hear of your interfering in my affairs again."

Rachel withdrew, much crestfallen. She betook herself to her mother's dressing-room in a very bad humour, and seated herself opposite to her without speaking.

"Well, my dear child," inquired Madam Charnock, glancing at her from over the edge of her embroidery frame, "what is amiss? This is April weather, truly! When you parted from me all was sunshine, and now I see the clouds have come."

Rachel's brow did not clear, however. "I cannot help feeling gloomy, ma'am," she replied. "You see it is naturally painful and humiliating to me to discover we have come down in the world."

"Indeed?" said her mother, pausing with uplifted needle. "And when did you make that discovery, my dear?"

"Why, madam, I have just been informed, first by two sturdy, rough-tongued old ploughmen, and afterwards by my father himself that Simon Fleetwood commands here now."

"And does that displease you very much?"

"Why, Mamma, of course it does. How can I be otherwise than mortified on realising such altered circumstances? We Charnocks are to submit in silence while Yeoman Fleetwood commands! It is a most painful and ridiculous situation. I cannot help thinking he must have taken advantage of my father's straits to have thus obtained control of his affairs."

"No, Rachel, you are unjust to Simon."

Mrs. Charnock pushed aside her frame and leaned forward, speaking earnestly. "You are unjust, I say. If Simon has undertaken this trust it is from motives which you should be the first to honour." She broke

off, remembering her promise, and fearing to say too much.

"Will this change in the management of affairs be of great assistance to my father, then?" inquired Rachel in an altered tone.

"Why, that remains to be seen. Simon will do his best; the pecuniary gain to him will be very small, and the trouble and responsibility great."

The girl's expression changed; she looked pensive, almost penitent. After a time she spoke again, and with a sigh.

"I am sorry to have been so hasty, Mother. I have really a very great regard for Simon. But I wish," she added impulsively, "he had not thought it necessary to plough up the park."

When, a little later on, she betook herself once more to the scene of her morning's encounter, she felt a return of irritation against Simon, who was the unwitting cause of her finding herself in such a false position. Thanks to him she would now be forced to own to these ploughmen of his, that she had been in the wrong in putting a stop to their proceedings.

When she arrived, however, at the spot in question, she found the ploughs had disappeared, and was, moreover, amazed to descry a line of men busily engaged in replacing the sods, that morning turned over, in their former position. Superintending the scene was Fleetwood himself; and after a pause of astonishment, not unmixed with dismay, Rachel made her way towards him. He turned to her with a smile at which her heart gave a little leap of relief. At least he was not angry.

"Why, what is going forward here, Mr. Fleetwood?" she inquired after the first greetings. "When I passed this morning your men were busy ploughing, and now they are busy ——"

"Repairing the damage that they caused," said Simon, finishing the sentence as she paused.

"But—for what reason?" she stammered, with her eyes on the ground.

"Can you ask? Do you think I would carry on an undertaking which was so unfortunate as to meet with your displeasure?"

"But," said Rachel raising her eyes timidly, "perhaps I was wrong. I—I know nothing about farming. My father," she added, in rather a choked voice, "appears quite content with your arrangements."

"Oh, you have been to complain of me?" said Simon, smiling down at her again. "Let us make a compact, Miss Charnock. In future, when you are displeased with any of my projects, will you be so good as to make your objections to me in person? They shall be at once attended to."

"I don't understand," she cried quickly. "I—I thought there was a mistake—I imagined my father did not know ——" she broke off in confusion, resuming presently in a lighter tone. "And, indeed, Mr. Fleetwood, I am a very ignoramus with regard to the management of land. I did not like to see the park ploughed up—but that was natural."

"It was most natural," cried he. "Truly I should have known better than to institute a change which could not but be unsightly. My only excuse, Miss Charnock, is that this ground is really in a very bad state, and that something must be done to it if it is ever to be made profitable."

"But—need a park be profitable?" inquired Rachel, with an innocent glance.

"That depends upon circumstances. In the present instance I think it most important that this land should bring at least some measure of profit to your father."

"Then, you see, I have done wrong to interfere," interposed Rachel hastily. "Pray set aside my objections and carry out your original plan."

"No, I have thought of a better one," he replied gaily. "You see, Miss Charnock, the grass, from long want of attention, has grown sour and rank. If we stocked it with ordinary cattle they would eat none of it. It was for this I thought to break it up for awhile, until it got into better condition. But I think now of stocking it with Highland cattle. These are accustomed to but sorry pasture in their native land, and will graze willingly on this. They will eat down this rank stuff to the very roots, and next year, after a little dressing, we may expect to find a new and sweeter herbage in its place."

Rachal had been listening half absently, tracing imaginary patterns on the ground with the point of her foot. She now looked up with a frown.

"Scotch cattle! In the park! Do you mean those creatures with immense horns, that look as they could run one through and through? Wicked little shaggy animals with rolling eyes that terrify one! I have seen pictures of the beasts. Why, Mr. Fleetwood, I do not like your plan at all. I should be vastly afraid of these cattle of yours. I think your first expedient the better of the two, indeed."

"Madam," replied Simon a little stiffly, "the first expedient is disposed of; of the second you are not as yet in a position to judge; but, if the promise will allay your fears, I will guarantee that these Scotch cattle of mine shall have no horns at all. And now, with your leave, I will attend to my business. My men have nearly finished this job, and I must set them to something else."

He bowed to her somewhat formally, and walked away, leaving Rachel no choice but to return homewards; which she did in a puzzled frame of mind.

CHAPTER XVIII.

My love is of a birth as rare
  As, 'tis, for object, strange and high:
It was begotten by despair
    Upon impossibility.
Magnanimous despair alone
  Could show me so divine a thing,
Where feeble hope could ne'er have flown,
  But vainly flapped its tinsel wing.

—ANDREW MARVELL.

SOME days later, Miss Charnock chanced to encounter Yeoman Fleetwood in the avenue which led to the Hall. He greeted her with a bright smile.

"I am fortunate in meeting you," he said. "I had thought of calling at the Hall, and requesting you to walk a little way with me."

"Indeed? I shall be very happy to do so, Mr. Fleetwood; but I am at a loss to find a reason for your desire of my company."

"If you will do me the favour of coming with me, madam, the reason will explain itself. I am anxious to secure your approval of measures I have just taken here."

Accommodating his pace to hers, he led her across the park; skirting the plantation, and halting finally at the very scene of their recent disagreement. Rachel now perceived that a line of railings spanned this particular portion of the park, a little above the strip of newly replaced sods.

She had walked by the yeoman's side in silence; she was beginning to feel shy with Simon, uncertain of what he would do or say. Her thoughts had been busy with

him of late, and she had come to the conclusion that she knew him very little. There were depths in him which she could not fathom ; turns of character which baffled her ; above all, a force which awed her in spite of herself. She determined to be on her guard with him, and not to commit herself by any foolish speech. But at first sight of these intrusive railings all her resolutions took flight, and she turned to Simon indignantly.

" If this is what you have brought me to see," she cried, " I do not like it at all."

" Do not be in too great a hurry," he said, with his quiet smile. " See, there is a stile here ; shall we cross it and examine a little further ? "

Without waiting for a reply he swung himself over it, and then extended a hand to Rachel.

" Thank you, I do not need your help," she returned petulantly. " I have no mind to climb the stile. I can see anything that is to be seen from here."

" I think not," he said, still smiling ; " not just now at least. Pray, Miss Charnock, oblige me in this small matter."

His hand was extended still, and, after a moment's hesitation, she condescended to touch it with the tips of her fingers. In another moment she stood on the ground by his side.

" Come a little this way, if you please," he said. " On the other side of yonder copse we shall find what we seek."

She walked along in silence, and presently beheld on the farther side of the plantation in question a herd of diminutive cattle—curious, shaggy creatures, for the most part of a slate-grey in colour—and without a horn among them.

Simon walked up to the nearest of them and began to stroke and rub its woolly head ; then he turned towards Rachel.

"Well, Miss Charnock, here are my Scotch cattle—Galloways—a hornless breed, you see. I think you can have no fear of them, for they could not gore or toss you if they tried. But, in case you might even yet feel alarmed at their proximity, I have railed off this portion of the park, so that you may walk undisturbed about the remainder."

She did not answer, and, leaving the cow, he returned to her; being surprised to see, as he drew near her, that her face was grave and downcast.

"Mr. Fleetwood," she said in a low voice, "I do not deserve that you should pay so much attention to my whims. I have been ungrateful and unmannerly, but I—I am truly sorry now. Indeed, I should be more gracious when you try so hard to please me."

"Oh!" cried Simon, with sudden vehemence, "if I could make you realise how earnest is my desire to please you—how I long to be of real service to you! Could I but convey to you how intense is my yearning to help you, to work for you! Alas, how vague and empty sound the words! Yet I would have you believe, Miss Charnock, that they are not spoken idly, but with most earnest truth. If—if, at any time you should have need of service, however difficult or dangerous, promise me that you will call upon me."

The girl's breath was fairly taken away. How different was the ring of Simon's speech from the protests of Gifford and her cousin Humphrey, though couched in nearly the same words: for the first time in her life she was brought face to face with a true man's passion. Her instinctive recognition of it frightened her, and, in girlish fashion, she sought to disguise her real emotion under the semblance of lightness.

"Why, Mr. Fleetwood," she cried in rather tremulous tones, and turning away from him a little, "how vehe-

ment you are! You have given me sufficient proof of devotion now, by investing in cattle without any horns, and railing off their pasture so that I need not see more of them than I wish. But if, at any future time, I should find myself—let me see—in a giant's den, or about to be devoured by a dragon, I will certainly promise to call upon you."

The light died out of Simon's eyes, and, after a short pause, he coldly expressed satisfaction at Miss Charnock's approval of his recent purchase, and intimated that he would now trespass on her time no longer.

"I will escort you as far as the stile," he added, with a somewhat constrained smile, "lest any of these dangerous animals should pursue you."

Rachel made no remark, and walked sedately by his side until they reached the stile; pausing there, however, and leaning against the topmost railing, she raised her eyes hesitatingly to his face.

"Mr. Fleetwood," she said diffidently, "you must think me very perverse."

The appealing look, the deprecating tone, banished Simon's resentment at once. He gazed at her kindly, but without replying. Rachel dropped her eyes, and absently stroked the railing. After a moment, she proceeded:—

"I don't know how it is—I always seem to say and do the wrong thing with you. I was wrong about—about Bertha; I was wrong again about the ploughing, and now I have been once more unkind and ill-mannered. Instead of jesting with you I should have thanked you."

"I need no thanks," said Simon in a low voice. "I ask nothing but that you will bear my words in mind."

"Well, I will promise to do that," said she reflectively; "but you must make me a promise in return."

"And what is that?" he cried eagerly. "Oh, madam, I swear ——"

"You need not swear, Mr. Fleetwood. 'Tis a very simple thing. Promise not to think too lowly of me, for I fear my recent conduct must needs have caused me to fall in your estimation. Do not deny it—your very manner betrays you."

She looked up suddenly, and found his eyes bent on her with an expression which quickly made her drop her own again.

"I do not think the same of you," he said gently.

"I knew it—I knew you could not think so highly of me as before."

"I did not say I thought less highly of you, madam; I said I thought differently."

"Explain yourself, I beg."

Here Rachel drew herself up and gazed at him haughtily.

"At one time," said Simon, with a curious tender inflection in his voice, "I took you to be an angel, Miss Charnock, and now I know you to be a woman."

His tone and manner restored Rachel's self-complacency. "Surely," she cried, with a conscious little smile, "the meaning is one and the same. You will not be so ungallant as to deny it."

"No," said Simon, "the meaning is very different."

"You would have me believe, I suppose," resumed Rachel, whose colour had been coming and going during the last few minutes, "you would have me believe that a woman is superior to an angel."

"Not quite," said Simon softly; "but to every man there must be a woman—one woman—who is to him the embodiment of all that is sweetest and best."

"You are speaking in riddles," murmured Rachel. "I have no time to decipher them now. It is growing late,

and my mother will be wanting me. Good-day, Mr. Fleetwood—come no farther, pray. I should be loth to take up your time."

As she recrossed the stile, she feigned not to see his proffered hand, but from under her eyelashes she took note of the renewed disappointment in his face. She uttered no further word, however, and made her way home with all speed.

CHAPTER XIX.

Whose latest and most leaden hours
Fall with soft wings stuck with soft flowers;
And when life's sweet fable ends,
Soul and body part like friends.

—CRASHAW.

RACHEL pondered a good deal over Simon's demeanour, and, though his admiration was not distasteful to her, she came to the conclusion that the young man must needs be kept at a greater distance. This decision of hers caused her a certain regret, for she really liked Fleetwood; and, as she reflected, with a sigh that was not all of compassion for Simon, it would cost her no small effort to repel advances at once so earnest and so delicate. She soon found, however, that she was not to be called upon to put these doubty resolutions into effect; for Simon made no further advances. They met frequently, Fleetwood's avocations necessarily causing him to spend much of his day at Charnleigh; and she invariably found him kind, good-humoured, eager to anticipate the wishes she was sometimes condescending enough to express, but with apparently no desire to meet her on any other footing than that of mere friendship.

On one occasion, indeed, he ventured to step beyond his self-imposed limits, and Rachel, who had been secretly slightly chagrined at his previous attitude, was, nevertheless, inconsequent enough to repel his overtures with equal coldness and promptitude. It happened to be a lovely summer's day, and Rachel, who had been

walking with her mother when they encountered him, had lingered behind a few paces to comment upon the fact to Simon.

"It is indeed a most perfect day," he replied. "I wish you could see my garden now, Miss Charnock. The rose-trees are weighed down with blossom, and as for the strawberries—I verily believe there is more fruit than leaves. I wonder whether you and Madam Charnock would care to taste them. We have a little arbour yonder where you could sit at ease, and my aunt would be proud to entertain you. I would pick the fruit for you, and she would contribute her best cream."

And thereupon Rachel, for what reason she never afterwards knew, had thrown back her head and averted her eyes, and replied, distantly, that she did not care for strawberries. Then Simon had raised his hat and bowed, and fallen back to join the workmen he was superintending.

Nevertheless when, as autumn advanced, Miss Belinda was taken suddenly and grievously ill, Rachel was among the first to hasten to the Farm with kind inquiries and sincere sympathy. Poor Aunt Binney, despite her seventy-five years, had ever been so hale and hearty that no one was more surprised then herself when it presently became evident that she must prepare with all speed to betake herself to a better world.

"Doctor says 'tis a break-up," she remarked to Simon one day with a puzzled air. "Eh, dear! I never reckoned to go all of a sudden that gate. I allus reckoned as break-ups come gradual like. This here 'titus is awful when it gets a real hold on ye—I don't seem no ways able to shake it off. But if I am to go—and the Lord's will be done—I'd as soon it were the 'titus as aught else, Simon. 'Tis a very decent complaint. Mrs. Charnock—Squire's first missis, you know — well, she died o' th'

'titus. And Mr. Renshaw's father were carried off by it too. 'Tis a deal be ter nor a stroke, or a bad leg or that, and gives a lot less trouble."

"I am sure nobody would mind the trouble, Aunt Binney," said Simon, "if there were any hope that you could get well."

A paroxysm of coughing prevented Miss Belinda's comment on this affectionate statement; but, by-and-bye, gazing at him somewhat mournfully with her head on one side, she observed feelingly :—

"Ye'll be like to miss me, lad—I know that well. Aye, 'twill be terrible lonesome for ye, when I'm gone. As long as Susan lives ye'll manage right enough, but eh, dear! whatever 'ull ye do when she goes—and she's nigh on seventy now, Susan is. But we must leave all to the Almighty. Happen ye'll not live so long yersel', Nephew. Eh! many a time I think what wi' riding they young horses, and walking about among bulls and sich like, 'tis a mercy ye've been spared till now. I shouldn't wonder, Simon, if ye followed me before aught was long."

This cheerful prognostication seemed to revive her spirits considerably; her wrinkled face wreathed itself with smiles.

"There's one thing, Nephew, I'd like to settle while I've my senses right. I'd been thinking, Simon, of making a new will. But before I get agate at it, I'd like to have a word wi' Miss Charnock. Ye see, lad, I reckon to leave her a little legacy—Cousin Pringle 'ull have the most of what I have to leave—she's always looked for it, poor soul, and named the oldest lass after me an' all, an' I'd be loth to disappoint her. 'Tisn't as if you wanted for aught—my little bit o' money 'ud be no loss to you, Simon, and I know you've never counted on't."

Simon hastened to assure the good old lady of his

entire concurrence in her scheme for leaving her money in a lump to Cousin Pringle, but expressed some curiosity as to the nature of the legacy she meant to bequeath to Miss Charnock.

"Eh! 'tis naught of any consequence—nobbut my recipe book. I know she's one as 'ull valley it—and she has a taste, mind ye, Nephew—wonderful taste for such-like. Eh! I reckon she'll be fain to have these old recipes. There's not the like to be found i' th' country now. The Christmas pudden is there, and orange cordial and damson cheese; then there's a many recipes for possets, and such-like. I reckon she'll be fain to have it—'tis all wrote out fair by my mother hersel'—and I'd be fain to think as Miss Charnock's name was in my will. I'll reckon she'll not think it a liberty, but I'll ask her before Mr. Renshaw sets it down. She sent me word she'd step up to see me this afternoon. You might ask Lawyer Renshaw to call to-morrow morn, Nephew, and we's get the matter settled."

The poor old lady had well-nigh exhausted herself with so much talking, but, nevertheless, when Rachel came to see her she had a very important announcement to make, besides discussing the proposed legacy.

"Though I say it as shouldn't," she began, "our Simon is a good lad. That quiet to live wi', that easy tempered! You might set what you like before him to eat and he'd never complain; there's never a word out of him, bless him! Aye, me an' him has lived together as happy as layrocks."

Rachel, with downcast eyes, remarked that Simon was, indeed, very good, and that he appeared to be much concerned at his aunt's illness.

"He is that," agreed Miss Belinda, comfortably. "Dear o' me, whatever he'll do without me I'm sure I can't think."

"Perhaps he'll marry?" suggested the girl, with her eyes still fixed on Aunt Binney's patchwork quilt.

"Well, I don't know, I'm sure, miss; I think somehow if Simon had reckoned to wed, he'd ha' done it before now. Says I to him last night—we was talking about funerals and that—says I, 'Simon,' I said, 'ye're terrible staid in your ways. God knows if you'll ever get wed.' And he says, looking at me so earnest—'God knows, indeed, Aunt,' he says; 'God knows ——'"

"You should have told him that he ought of course to marry now," cried Miss Charnock, with heightened colour.

"Simon never was one to make much count o' women folk," returned Miss Fleetwood. "I often wondered he wasn't snapped up afore this—he'd make a good husband—he's been a good son and a good nephew. Is yon door quite shut, Miss Charnock?"

"Quite," returned the girl, with a glance towards it.

"Then I'll tell you a bit of a secret. Simon's behaved wonderful handsome to me about my buryin'. I says to him: 'Nephew,' I said, 'I *would* like to have a nice buryin'". And he towd me he'd see I had one. Well, you see, Miss Charnock, I have a wonderful fancy to be buried with a hearse. Folks about here never has aught but walking funerals, but, when Pringle died—that's Cousin Pringle's husband—he had a hearse fro' Liverpool and a mourning coach, and there were black feathers to th' horses' heads, and at four corners o' th' hearse—eh! they looked real well; gradely they did. Still, as I said to Simon, I'm the last o' th' Fleetwood females—'without you get wed,' says I, 'and have a daughter of your own'. (That was the time I told him that I didn't think it likely he'd wed, and he says, 'God only knows'.) 'So,' says I, 'I would really like to have a proper funeral. I'd like,' I says, 'a hearse with white feathers—black

ones is for married folk, my Cousin Pringle says, and, thanks be to God, I never had a husband; and I'd like a coach for yourself, Simon, and another coach for Susan and Dolly and Bill—how much would that come to, d'ye think?' says I. And he told me not to mind what it coom to, he'd see as I had whatever I fancied. Well, then, I said if it came too expensive, I'd give o'er thinking on it, 'for I don't want,' I says, 'to cut too much off fro' Cousin Pringle's legacy'. 'Don't trouble about that, Aunt Binney,' says he, 'you shall have whatever you wish for, and I'll pay for it. 'Tis the least I may do,' he says, 'after you keepin' house for me so long.' Now warn't that handsome o' him?"

Rachel had listened with an extraordinary mixture of feelings to the old woman's story, as it was laboriously and brokenly poured forth. Full of young warm life herself, she shrank from the grisly details which Miss Fleetwood enumerated with such keen satisfaction. It was pathetic to hear the poor old body so calmly discussing the ceremonial in which she was indeed to bear a prominent part, but which she would not then be in a condition to enjoy; but there was also an element of the grotesque, not to say the comic, in such zest. She found herself absolutely unable to frame any reply which should seem adequate to the occasion, and contented herself with patting Aunt Binney's wrinkled hand, as it lay outside the coverlet.

"There'll be the hearse," went on the sick woman, following out the train of thought, "and two coaches—mourning coaches; and very like Lawyer Renshaw 'ull come in's gig. That 'ull be four carriages altogether—eh! all the neighbours 'ull think it gradely! Four carriages!"

"Perhaps my father would allow his coach to attend," put in Rachel, anxious to atone for her former shrink-

ing reluctance to pursue the topic by making a suggestion which could not fail to be pleasing. "I think it exceedingly likely that he would allow his coach to follow, as a mark of respect. I know he has done so once or twice when he has been unable to attend funerals himself."

"Eh, dear!" ejaculated Miss Binney, and clapped her withered hands. "Eh! miss, I'd never make so bold as to ask for such a thing, but if he did, I'd have nothing left to wish for. Squire's coach to follow my remains! That 'ud make five altogether. Why, there has not been such a sight in Charnleigh village, not since th' old Squire died, and was sent home from London to be buried. Miss, dear, I would take it as an honour. Well, what with Squire's coach coming to my funeral, and you being so good, Miss Charnock, as to allow me to mention you in my will, I may, indeed, look to die respected. Yon's the book there, see, in the window-seat, Miss Charnock. Cast your eye over it now, if you've a fancy to, and Lawyer Renshaw 'ull make it over to you when I am gone."

Rachel, eager to change the subject, crossed the room, and took up the quaint book with its superfluity of injunctions and minuteness of detail. Miss Belinda's mother's spelling had not been on a par with her housewifely knowledge, and Rachel smiled to herself over sundry items. Under the heading "Damsel Cheese" —the late Mrs. Fleetwood having given the same title to the fruit in question as Rachel's foreign mother had done—particular stress was laid on the fact that the "damsels must not be broozed," while the receipt for "Suking Pig" gave such a variety of directions regarding the manner of demise of the animal in question that Rachel hastily turned over the page.

She left Miss Belinda in no small degree exhausted,

but thoroughly happy and complacent; and the will was drawn up next day to the complete satisfaction of the testator.

Rachel came several times to the house during the ensuing days, and even accompanied her mother when, after poor Miss Belinda's death, her earthly remains were duly laid out with all prescribed ceremonial. It was the first time she had been brought face to face with death, and she looked pale and scared as she followed Madam Charnock up the old oak stairs. But, despite her shrinking, she would not turn back, and, indeed, there was nothing alarming about the placid old face that lay smiling on the pillow, or the poor form that looked so small and shrunken now. Susan and Dolly were in the room, red-eyed and shaken with sobs, but, nevertheless, distinctly flattered and consoled by the honour Madam Charnock was doing their former mistress by visiting all that was left of her.

As the ladies quitted the house, Simon met them in the hall, and thanked them, not only for calling then, but for their many kindnesses to his aunt during her illness. Mrs. Charnock uttered some words of heartfelt sympathy, and Rachel lingered a moment behind her mother to say, with a wistful upward glance at the yeoman's grave and sorrowful face, "You will be very lonely now, poor Simon".

"I shall indeed," said he; "very lonely."

CHAPTER XX.

With tranquil step, and timid downcast glance,
Behold the well-paired couple now advance,
In such sweet posture our first parents moved,
While, hand in hand, through Eden's bowers they roved,
Ere yet the Devil, with promise fine and false,
Turned their poor heads, and taught them how to waltz.
—SHERIDAN.

MISS BELINDA'S funeral was all that she could have wished in her most sanguine moments. Simon spared no expense in carrying out the plan she had laid down, though the pomp, and ceremonial, and artificiality of this simulated mourning were repulsive to him, in his own genuine grief. He would have liked to have followed a simple coffin on foot and in the company of the few who had known and loved the good old lady; but, nevertheless, was determined on keeping his promise to the very letter.

So coal-black horses, with phenomenally long manes and tails, stamped in the courtyard of the Farm, and plumes waved, and scarves and hatbands and black gloves were duly served out, and Susan, Dolly, and Bill sat in state in one of the coaches, in blissful melancholy—if such a combination be possible—and conscious that their own equipage, as containing members of the household, took precedence even of the Squire's carriage. For Mr. Charnock had made no demur when his daughter formulated her request, and was, indeed, tickled at the poor old lady's anxiety for the honour, and perhaps not ill-pleased at the opportunity for proving to his humbler

neighbours what a kind-hearted and condescending gentleman he was. And poor Simon sate alone as chief mourner in his own gloomy vehicle, and thought very sadly of the old times that would never come again, and of how now the last link with the past was broken.

The autumn wore away, and the winter came, and Simon's life flowed on uneventfully enough. Madam Charnock lost no opportunity of showing him kindness, and Simon was even permitted to join the family circle occasionally, and to play a game of picquet after dinner with the Squire. Rachel too was uniformly gracious now, and showed a consideration for the young yeoman in his trouble which went straight to his heart. But, nevertheless, he took no advantage of this altered demeanour; and "'Tis compassion," he said to himself, "'tis but her blessed pity—God reward her for it! I will not build on it too much; I will wait and work and hope, and by-and-bye she may turn to me."

But with the first dawn of spring Rachel made an announcement which alike surprised and grieved him.

"Do you know, Simon, that I have been asked to pay a visit to my Uncle and Aunt Charnock in town? My father says that I am to see the world. I am to be presented, and to go out into society. What think you of this prospect, Mr. Fleetwood?"

Simon had been standing in the sheep-field, watching a somewhat sickly lamb stagger about on uncertain little legs; he continued to gaze at it for some moments before turning his eyes towards Miss Charnock.

"What think I, madam? Why, that we, left behind at Charnleigh, will miss you very much."

"Ah! but that is selfish," responded Rachel. "Here am I, nearly eighteen, and I have as yet seen nothing of life. Save for my schooling abroad, and my visit to my

grandmother, I have been brought up like any village girl. You ought to be glad for my sake that this opportunity offers."

"If it makes you happy, I shall of course try to be glad," said Simon.

"Why, of course it makes me happy. I shall dance, and go to the play, and make new friends; and when I return I shall be so brightened up and improved that you will not know me."

Simon smiled a little sadly. "God forbid that you should change, Miss Charnock," he said.

"Well, one thing is certain," pursued the girl; "you will never change, Simon. When I come back I shall find you here wandering about the fields, looking round you with that contemplative gaze of yours, just the same as ever, shall I not?"

"Just the same," agreed he; and then, stepping away from her, caught up the little lamb, whose feeble limbs had given way beneath it.

"I must carry this creature home," said he; "it wants warmth and special attention."

"And do you not wish me joy, Simon?"

"With all my heart," returned he, but with so troubled a look that Rachel carried away the memory of it. Indeed, for many a day after, the image rose before her of Simon's face with the beclouded eyes, as he stood gazing after her and holding the little lamb in his arms.

In a few days she departed, duly escorted by maid and footman; Mr. and Mrs. Charnock remained behind; for, despite a nominal reconciliation, the Squire and his brother were not really on friendly terms. Mr. John Charnock had refused to come to his senior's aid in cutting off the entail on any portion of the estate, though, as the Squire frequently asserted, he would never miss the loss of a field or two when he succeeded,

and the ready money would have made all the difference to himself.

Nevertheless, both John Charnock and his wife were fond of Rachel and determined, as they said, to give her a chance. Being less extravagant than his brother, the Squire, the younger Mr. Charnock was able to keep up a nice house in town; he and his wife moved in very good society, and Rachel could, in consequence, make her *début* with due pomp and every prospect of success.

Despite his small liking for his brother, the Squire had shown himself eager for the acceptance of the invitation; he was desirous that his daughter should have every advantage becoming to her station, and, moreover, entertained hopes that, during her absence, she might come across some young gentleman of fortune and position to whom she might form an attachment.

He was quite ready to take Simon's money and avail himself of his help; and, moreover, tolerated his occasional presence in the house. Fleetwood was a good, quiet fellow, who spoke sensibly and never obtruded his opinions, and he played a capital game of picquet, though not quite so good a game as the Squire himself, who, in consequence, liked him the better; but as to his daring to aspire to Rachel, the notion was too preposterous to be contemplated. He had talked a good deal of nonsense about it to begin with, but had evidently come to his senses of late—any one could see he was not thinking of paying attention to the girl—and now, even if she did not secure a husband and establishment yonder, she would at least make the acquaintance of a dozen smart young beaux who would quite throw poor, plodding Simon in the shade

"Egad, madam," cried Mr. Charnock, banging on the table with his fist when his wife demurred, "the girl shall go, if only for that. By George, we know

what girls are. Simon is the only young man she sees much of just now, and there is no knowing what folly may come into her head if left to herself. But let her see the world, madam, let her see the world, and I'll warrant you Master Simon will be forgot quick enough."

Mrs. Charnock was too well accustomed to her husband's inconsequence to point out the contradictoriness of his recent statements, and, with many forebodings, set about preparations for her daughter's journey. Her bird was to leave the nest, to escape from under her wing, and to fly out into the great world; how would it fare with her there?

Rachel wrote home frequently, and each letter bore a rapturous postscript in the hand of her Aunt Charnock. The dear girl was so much admired, so lovely, so witty, so graceful. People predicted that she would be the reigning toast of the season, and already the young bucks were fighting for her hand at the dance. His Royal Highness had particularly noticed her, and the great Mr. Brummel had got himself introduced at her first ball. This, Mrs. John Charnock needed not to assure her sister-in-law, was a very great honour indeed, and no one knew what it might lead to; for it was well known that a word of commendation from the celebrated beau was sufficient in itself to make a *débutante* all the rage.

When all the land lay golden in the summer warmth she returned, and Simon first caught sight of her as she walked up the path to the church one brilliant Sunday morning. She wore a hat of strange shape, and her blooming face was partly concealed by a lace veil very tantalising to the beholder. It seemed to Simon that she had grown taller, but this fancy of his was perhaps due to the fact that she held herself more erect, and

carried her head with a more imperial grace. Poor Simon! it would scarce be fair to reveal how much her presence disturbed his devotion, nor how often his usually pious mind wandered that Sunday morning. Yet he had seldom repeated with greater fervour the prayer which so often rose to his lips: "God give her to me," though it might be that there was less of confidence in this petition than of old. Rachel was very devout and demure, and did not so much as turn her eyes once in his direction; and Simon was too shy, and perhaps too proud, to linger near the porch when the congregation poured out, but donned his hat and went home without glancing to right or to left.

The next day, however, as he was wending his way towards a certain wheat-field which formed part of the Charnleigh Home Farm, he came face to face with Rachel. She was dressed simply in white, and her broad straw hat was slung by its ribbons over her arm; had it not been that her hair was dressed in a fanciful fashion which became her marvellously well, and that her beauty had developed and ripened—so that lovely as she had been before she was to Simon's dazzled gaze ten times more beautiful now—he would have said that she looked like her old self. She paused amid the sunlit green and stretched out both hands.

"I vow you are the very man I wanted to see," she cried. "Pray, were you coming to call on me, Simon?"

"Nay," he returned, "I would not venture to intrude so soon. I was on my way to inspect the wheat-field yonder."

"As I foretold," cried Rachel, "you have not changed at all. I left you wandering about the fields, placid and contemplative; and I return to find you the same. Oh, I could find it in my heart to envy you."

She spoke petulantly, yet with an undercurrent of real emotion.

"Simon," she pursued after a moment, "could you not leave the wheat-field for a little while and turn your thoughts to me? I would be glad to speak to you."

"Could I not, indeed!" cried Simon; and Rachel, looking up, saw his face brighten and glow, but, feigning to observe nothing, fell to plucking the leaves from the hedge near which they stood, in apparent absence of mind.

"As to turning my thoughts to you," he went on, breathlessly and tremulously, "you know very well, Miss Charnock, that it will require no very great effort on my part to do that, for they are seldom absent from you."

"So much the better," answered she. "And now, Mr. Fleetwood, let us find a comfortable spot and sit down. I have a weighty matter to discuss with you, and if you do not grudge me the time—well then—" answering the protest in his eyes—"since I know very well you do not grudge me the time, Simon, let us consider it at our ease."

They sat down beneath a great tree, and Rachel, instead of speaking, twined her fingers in the grass beside her, and plucked the blades and threw them away. Simon's heart beat so loud and fast that he fancied she must hear it. Perhaps she did; at all events she must have taken count of the agitation which he could not conceal. At last, clasping her hands together on her lap, she turned towards him; her face was grave, and paler than it had been a little time before.

"Do you remember, Simon," she said, "something you said to me one day—something I laughed at then and pretended not to care about, but which I took note of?"

"I remember, madam," said Simon, "every word that I have ever spoken to you, and every word that you have ever said to me."

She laughed a little unsteadily. "What, all my foolish speeches? Ah, what a terrible memory! But I am glad all the same. Well, then, Mr. Fleetwood, you will doubtless remember having once assured me that you would help me if ever I stood in need of help."

"I remember it well," said Simon in that curious vibrating voice of his which told Rachel more plainly than words all that he was with such difficulty keeping back.

"You told me then," she went on, "that you would willingly undertake for me any service, however difficult or dangerous; well, I have need of such service now. As to danger, there may be little of that; yet there is certainly difficulty, and I—I—well, Mr. Fleetwood, I am in a dilemma, and I want you to help me out of it if you can. You must hear what I have to say, and then tell me if you can."

"Madam, you shall tell me," cried Simon. "But first be assured that if your difficulty be such as man can help you out of I both can and will."

"Now, do not be rash," cried Rachel, holding up a warning forefinger. "'The blind cannot lead the blind,' remember. Well, how shall I begin? Mr. Fleetwood, have you ever heard of the new dance which is just now in vogue? I believe it originally came from Austria. It is called the waltz."

Simon, who had been prepared for some very tragic disclosure, was somewhat taken aback by this apparent trifling, and shook his head in reply with a gravely perplexed air.

"Well, I must describe it to you, or you will not understand my story. It is very much the fashion, you must know. You do not take your partner's hand, but —but—well, the gentleman puts his right arm round the lady's waist, and she puts her left hand on his shoulder

and her right arm round him, so that it rests on his left hip. I don't know if you understand?"

Simon's questioning expression might well have given rise to doubt.

"A little time ago," pursued Rachel hastily, "it used to be danced with a handkerchief, which was passed round the lady, and the two ends of which were held by the gentleman, while her hands rested lightly on his shoulders; but that mode has gone out now. When the partners are in position they twirl and twirl and twirl to the sound of the most intoxicating music; and that is a waltz, Simon; and you need not look so scandalised, because I have never danced it, and I do not mean to if I can help it."

The yeoman drew a long breath of relief; but even yet his cheeks were crimson, and he could scarce bring himself to look Rachel in the face. Her flippant tone in describing a performance which, as it seemed to his unsophisticated mind, no modest woman ought even to have witnessed, had grated on him extremely; and it was anguish to him to think of the surroundings in which she had recently found herself.

"But thereby hangs a tale," she continued. "I do not dance the waltz, Mr. Fleetwood, though many call my repugnance affected and prudish. I am sure I am continually pestered by the gentlemen who want to be my partners. There is one in particular—a very fashionable personage, a friend of Mr. Brummel's and a leader of the *ton*—who simply worries me to death about it. His name is Sir Walter Brooke, and he is considered vastly important in his own set. He entertains me much; and Cousin Humphrey is furiously jealous of him."

"Is your Cousin Humphrey then ——?" began Simon, who had been listening with a grave and mystified air at Rachel's somewhat disjointed confidences.

"Yes, Mr. Fleetwood," she broke in before he could finish the sentence, "my Cousin Humphrey plagues me vastly, if that is what you mean, and I plague him too. He has no right to consider himself my mentor. Well, he is, as I say, furiously jealous, and one day chancing to stand by while Sir Walter was lamenting my cruelty in refusing to dance the waltz with him, he put on so gloomy and disagreeable a face that I could not forbear teasing him. So I explained very graciously to Sir Walter that my objection was not to the partner but to the dance; that I was a countrified damsel and had not yet been educated according to the notions of town-bred folk; but that, for aught that any one knew, in time I might learn to adapt myself. Rapture of Sir Walter—rage of my cousin! As for me I was all artless innocence."

Simon made a little abrupt movement at which Rachel, who had been laughing, suddenly composed her features and went on hurriedly:—

"Humphrey took me by the arm, and, pretending that his mother wanted me, drew me on one side. His face was fierce enough to frighten one, but I am not easily cowed. 'I forbid you, miss,' he whispered in my ear as soon as we were at a safe distance, 'I forbid you to dance the waltz with that fellow.' 'Why, then,' said I, 'just to prove to you, Master Humphrey, that you have no right to forbid me anything, I will promise to dance it with him at the very first opportunity.' He walked off, looking like a thunder-cloud. Sir Walter took me in to supper, and once more eagerly pressed the point, urging me to dance the first waltz with him at the ball at Devonshire House. This, being mindful of my cousin and anxious to triumph over him, I accordingly promised to do, and thereupon Sir Walter, who looked flushed and excited, drew a note-book from his pocket: 'We know,' quoth he, 'that ladies are privileged

to change their minds, and I would not have you change yours. Let me petition for one more proof of condescension, Miss Charnock. You will earn my undying gratitude if you will give me your promise in writing ——' "

"But you did not?" interrupted Simon, bending forward eagerly.

"Indeed, I did," returned Rachel ruefully, "and I have never ceased to repent it; for only think, Mr. Fleetwood! That wretch, Sir Walter, has made me the subject of a wager. Yes, truly; it is the talk of the clubs, Humphrey says—so far from my triumphing over him, it is he who crows angrily over my humiliation and defeat. The bet has been registered on both sides—no less a person than Mr. Brummel has taken it up; for you must know that he himself once did me the honour of proposing to be my partner in this dance, and such is his conceit that he cannot bring himself to believe I could grant a favour to another which was denied to him. The stakes are very high, and it seems to me that, whichever way the matter ends, I shall find myself equally notorious. And that is not all ——"

She paused abruptly, averting her face, but Simon saw the colour rush over cheek and neck, dying even the little ear with crimson.

"In my endeavours to make matters better I have unfortunately made them worse. You see I thought to cajole Sir Walter into returning me this dangerous bit of paper. I made myself most agreeable to him whenever we met; I received him each time that he called at my aunt's house; and the result is that, though he will not let me off my promise, his flame, as he calls it, has become most inconveniently ardent."

She turned and faced Simon again, blushing still, but smiling with a whimsical kind of triumph. They made an odd contrast; Simon leaning forward, his strong face

all astir with emotion, his eyes gazing steadfastly, it might be a little sternly, at the wayward, bewitching creature at his side—this new Rachel, who had brought back with her from the great world of which he knew nothing, a host of fascinating airs and graces which, in spite of his disapproval, riveted his chains more firmly. The insight of love told him that the atmosphere of artificiality with which she had surrounded herself, even in this quiet green nook, was as uncongenial to her as it was to him; childlike, she but aped the tone and manners of those amid whom she had been recently thrown, pattering off her lesson with delight at her own proficiency, but not, he felt sure, laying it to heart.

"It was for this, I suppose," he said quietly, "that you returned sooner than you intended. Well, thank Heaven, you are here!"

"I'm not at all so sure that you do well to thank Heaven," responded Rachel, shrugging her shoulders. "I am very much in the position of a fox that has been run to earth. I have but this morning received a note from Sir Walter announcing that he has come here after me. He is actually staying at the Hen and Chicken Inn but five miles from here."

"Well, what matters that?" said Simon. "It is to be presumed that in your own father's house you are safe. And there are others besides him ready and able to defend you!"

"Ah, that is just the point I wanted to come to; but we must not go too fast. First of all I must inform you that I am most anxious to keep this business of the wager from the knowledge of my papa and mamma. This complicates matters, you observe."

"Must it be so? I should have thought that to your mother at least ——"

"You would have thought wrong, Mr. Simon. My

dear little mother is the last person in the world whom I wish to be worried or distressed. I know not what she would say were the news of this sad scrape to come to her ears. No, no; even Humphrey has promised to keep it secret from her. But, now, put on your considering cap and listen very attentively, for I will read you Sir Walter's letter. It begins, you must know, with a deal of high-flown nonsense about the state of mind into which he was thrown by my unexpected flight. Let me see . . . h'm, h'm . . . Town a desert. . . . Assemblies unlit by my eyes, like the sky without stars. Ah! here we come to the point: 'Finding it impossible to exist in a world so gloomy, and being indeed drawn by an attraction stronger than the power of the magnet for the needle, I have this very day arrived amid the regions gladdened by your presence. Though the edict of my cruel charmer forbids my visiting at her home, she cannot prevent my dwelling in the neighbourhood. I warn you then, O obdurate beauty, that I shall continue to haunt the woods and fields which surround your abode. No rustic Strephon ever dogged the footsteps of his reluctant Chloe more persistently than I will dog the footsteps of my coy and cruel fair. You shall not be rid of me till you grant me at least one interview—no, not though you remain in utter seclusion for months. See to what a pass you have brought your faithful admirer—drive him not to extremities, most bewitching Rachel, if you would not have him take some desperate step. You have shunned me of late, but you were not wont to be so harsh'—Then he rambles on for a long time," pursued Rachel, in an indifferent tone. "I will not tax your patience with his nonsensical tirades; but here we come to the real motive of the letter, and I must own," she added, drawing together her pretty brows, "it puzzles and annoys me:

'Let me beg of you to consider the plan which I would now suggest to you. Consent to meet me at a spot which I shall point out, at a sufficient distance from your father's house to secure your movements being unobserved, and we will there once more discuss the vexed question of the promised waltz. It is possible that we may arrive at some compromise. The affair has now become as painful to me as you allege it is to yourself; nevertheless, my honour is engaged, and I cannot draw back, unless you yourself give me such good and weighty reasons as shall force me to withdraw. Do but consider this proposal—I ask only for a single interview. I promise to bring with me the paper about which we have so fiercely quarrelled, and I vow to you on my honour as a gentleman that if you but satisfy me in this matter you shall yourself destroy it in my presence.' There is a postscript to the effect that, his impatience brooking no delay, he has been to reconnoitre; and fixes as the place of meeting the wood known as the Three Corners, a mile to the north of my father's house, and will await me there at the blasted oak to-morrow, between five and six in the afternoon. Now, Simon Fleetwood, what think you of that? What possible compromise can he suggest?"

"What think I?" cried Simon, whose colour had risen during the perusal of this document, and who, indeed, had found it hard to listen to it in patience, "I think the fellow is an impudent scoundrel. I would you would let me deal with him."

"Why, Simon, would you really take this pother off my hands?" cried Rachel excitedly; "to tell the truth, I myself had some notion of asking you to accompany me, and this is the favour I spoke of, for it seems to me that I shall be forced to keep this assignation. The wretch is desperate, as he says, and if I push him too

hard is capable of making great trouble. How thankful I am I met you, I should not at all have liked to venture alone to the Three Corners, and to no one but you, Simon, would I confess my dilemma."

"You must not go near him," said the yeoman decidedly. "I take you at your word, Miss Charnock. I will undertake to manage this business, I will meet the gentleman to-morrow in your place, and will guarantee that he shall trouble you no more."

"Verily, Simon, if you accomplish that you will be a mighty clever man. I give you leave to try, however. In truth I have no mind to meet Sir Walter Brooke at all—but the wager—we must not forget the wager. He holds that plaguy paper still, remember."

"You shall have the paper back," returned Simon quietly.

"It will not be so easy to obtain it, but still 'Faint heart never'—I mean," pausing in confusion, "I don't know what I mean."

Simon looked at her very earnestly—"I would I knew it," he said, adding in a lower tone, half to himself, "I would you knew what *I* mean".

"Perhaps I do," said Rachel; and she got up very quickly and ran away.

CHAPTER XXI.

A fine puss gentleman that's all perfume;
The sight's enough.
—COWPER.

THE wood known as the Three Corners stretched its dusky triangular length in the midst of a marshy tract of ground, mere waste land, but seldom invaded by man or beast, save at certain seasons of the year when the "withies," or willows, which throve apace in that sodden soil were cut by the inhabitants of the nearest hamlet, and sold to the gipsy folk who passed their way. A bye-path across the fields of Charnleigh Manor led to the wood on the hither side, but the only public approach to the Three Corners was a sandy lane, deeply indented with ruts, and almost impassable in winter.

It was along this lane that Simon made his way, to hold tryst with Sir Walter Brooke, a little before the hour which that worthy had mentioned in his letter to Rachel. Swinging along at a rapid pace, he skirted the deep ditch which bordered this wood, and which, draining the soil in some measure, made of the peaty banks above a congenial dwelling-place for the magnificent undergrowth of rhododendrons which in spring turned the lonely spot into a very fairy bower; as he turned the corner, and prepared to follow the narrow path, which, striking off from the lane aforesaid, led across a roughly constructed foot-bridge to the centre of the wood, he came to an abrupt stop, whistling under his breath.

Lo! at the farther turn of the lane, and drawn up well

beneath the shelter of the wood, he descried a post-chaise. A pair of powerful horses were harnessed to this vehicle, and the postboy sat in his place, flicking idly at his boots with his whip. After pausing to take in these details Simon pursued his original course with compressed lips, and a heavy frown upon his brow.

A few minutes brisk walking brought him to the inner side of the wood, and there, in the midst of the little clearing, stood the blasted oak which was his goal. Another rapid stride or two revealed to him the tall and slender figure of a man leaning against it; a man dressed in the extreme of the prevailing fashion, whose blue coat and kerseymere pantaloons were evidently the production of an artist, while the immaculate whiteness of his frilled shirt, the accurate folds of his starched cravat, and the incomparable polish of his Hessian boots did credit alike to washerwoman and valet. Sir Walter had removed his hat, and—possibly on account of the said cravat—had tilted his head a little backwards against the tree, so that his pale face with its framework of black curls was thrown into strong relief against the grey bark: a handsome face in its way, with aquiline features and bold dark eyes. As Simon drew nearer, these eyes which had been fixed intently in the opposite direction, reverted slowly to the yeoman's sturdy form and rested on it languidly.

When the newcomer, instead of passing on, halted abruptly in front of him, a momentary expression of surprise passed over the dandy's face; but it was quickly gone again, and without moving his head or in any way changing his easy attitude he drawled out that it was a fine day.

"It is, indeed, a very fine day, Sir Walter Brooke," returned Simon; "but I have not come hither to discuss the weather with you."

"Ha!" remarked the baronet, expressing, however, no further curiosity on the subject of the unsought-for interview.

Simon, after waiting for a moment for the query which did not come, pursued in the same tone:

"I came here on the part of a lady, whose name need not be mentioned between us, to transact for her the little matter of business about which you recently communicated with her".

Under the olive skin the dark colour showed for a moment, and a gleam came into the eyes which had been hitherto staring at Simon with such cold impertinence. But if Sir Walter felt a twinge of angry jealousy he allowed no sign of it to appear in voice or manner.

"The lady's choice of emissary surprises me," he said, putting his quizzing glass to his eye and smiling contemptuously. "Let me see: you are too young to be her father, and she has, methinks, no brother; with the exception of my good friend Humphrey, I have never heard her mention a cousin—who may you be, my good man?"

"My name is no concern of yours," returned the yeoman shortly. "It is enough that I know you—aye, better than you think for, perhaps—and that I am here to checkmate your design against this lady's peace. Perhaps I can make a guess at what you have in your mind, Sir Walter, but we will not waste time in discussing that."

"My dear fellow," said Brooke with an affected yawn, "I have not the least idea of what you are talking about, but I quite agree with you that we are wasting time here. I presume that the lady is not coming, and therefore, charmed as I am to make acquaintance with any friend of hers, I will not intrude further on your valuable time. Pray, thank Miss Charnock for her civility in notifying to me her inability to keep this

appointment, and tell her it is but a pleasure deferred. I shall possess my soul in patience until the severity of her mood relaxes."

As he spoke he picked up his hat from the ground, and, with an airy nod, would have passed Simon but that the latter threw out his arm so as to bar his progress.

"Not so fast, sir," he cried; "you must hear a word or two from me before you go. You have subjected this lady to the most base, unmanly persecution—that persecution must henceforward cease. You have in your possession at this moment a certain note in her handwriting, of which you intend to make a use that may compromise her. Before you leave this spot, Sir Walter Brooke, you must hand over that piece of paper to me."

"Must I indeed, Sir Unknown?" retorted the baronet. "I don't quite see how you will compass all this, most valiant knight."

"Why, very simply," returned Simon.

With a sudden movement he pinioned Sir Walter's arms, brought them dexterously together, and then, holding them fast in the iron grip of one mighty hand, began with the other to search his pockets; but Brooke, though he struggled impotently in Fleetwood's grasp, had other means of defence at his disposal. His lips quivered with fury, and it may be alarm, but he managed, nevertheless, to purse them into the required form, and whistled twice, sharply and shrilly.

There was a rustling movement in the neighbouring underwood, and presently a man sprang out—a tall fellow dressed like a groom—who hastened towards the tree. He was carrying a long heavy cloak, the folds of which he shook out as he ran, extending it with both hands as though making ready to throw it about some one. When he drew near the struggling couple at the trysting place, however, he stopped short with an expression of con-

sternation and astonishment that would have been ludicrous had not the matter been of such serious import.

"Come on, you scoundrel!" roared his master; "drop that d——d cloak and rid me of this murderous devil. What are you standing there for, you great oaf, while you see that he has overpowered me?"

The fellow dropped the cloak and rushed on Simon, who, without relaxing his hold on the master, dealt the man so vigorous a backhander with his sledge-hammer fist that it sent him flying on his back some yards away, his head striking against the rugged root of the tree as he fell, so that he lay stunned and motionless.

Simon now turned his attention to Brooke, his face livid with passion. As by a lightning flash the chain of evidence, of which he had hitherto identified but disconnected links, was now fully revealed to him. The note which had been intended to decoy Rachel to the spot, the post-chaise ready to start at a moment's notice, the signal which should summon yonder prostrate loon to Sir Walter Brooke's assistance, the cloak in which doubtless the girl was to have been infolded in case she proved contumacious, so that her struggles might be checked and her cries stifled—the whole of the abominable plot was made patent to him in a moment; and his face as he turned it towards his would-be supplanter was so terrible that the man thought his last hour had come.

At first sight of the dandy Simon had felt his heart grow hot within him with wrath and scorn. For all his hermit life and apparent tranquillity of mood this dweller amid woods and fields was intensely human, and all that day had been a prey to one of the strongest and fiercest of the primary passions—the jealous love which scarce can brook the presence of a rival. But now on realising that this affected fop, whom he had disdained as a mere apology for a man, was at heart so black a traitor as to plan the

abduction of an unsuspecting girl, and that girl Simon's heart's beloved, a gust of fury took possession of him which for the moment swept his strong, self-contained nature past its moorings.

Tightening his grasp on the baronet's pinioned arms he swung him off his feet, raised him bodily in the air, and would have dashed him violently against the tree-trunk had not Sir Walter, lifting up his voice, uttered a wail of terror, shrill and tremulous like that of a woman. On hearing it Simon came to himself, paused, still holding the swaying form, and finally cast it down roughly enough upon the marshy ground. He himself dropped with his victim, and knelt beside him, still imprisoning his arms.

"You cur!" he said. "By Heaven! I was within an ace of dashing out those miserable brains of yours. I thank my God that I stopped myself in time, for I would not be a murderer. You are too poor a thing to fight with, but, by Heaven! I will make sure that you plot no more. Mark me, Sir Walter Brooke, if you dare to harass Rachel Charnock again, by word or deed, you shall rue it all the days of your life. Do not think to escape me. I will not kill you—so I tell you plainly—but I will spoil your beauty for you. No lady's heart shall ache again for your handsome face when I have done with you. Now, sit up, and give me that paper."

He released Sir Walter, but remained on the alert, ready to seize him again if he attempted to escape.

Now, the abject physical terror to which that dapper young buck had recently been a prey had come as a surprise even to himself. Like other youths of his kidney, he rather fancied himself a proficient in the "noble art of self-defence," and had once or twice taken a principal part in an affair of honour; no one had hitherto

had occasion to consider him lacking in courage. But then it does not often fall to a man's lot to find Retribution, in the form of a rustic giant of herculean strength, overtake him in the midst of an apparently successful piece of perfidy; to feel himself helpless as a babe in his murderous grip; to escape by a hair's breadth forfeiting life as a stoat, or a weasel, or any other such vermin might forfeit it; or—worse alternative still—to be aware that the merciless fists, the strength of which he has recently felt, are ready and apparently itching to pound all shape and beauty out of the face which is his most valued possession. Such an experience might well excuse Sir Walter's paroxysm of fear, and the alacrity with which he obeyed his tyrant's commands.

With trembling hands he produced from an inner pocket an elaborately embroidered letter-case, out of which, after some fumbling, he took a folded piece of paper. Simon having opened and read it, and assured himself that it was indeed in Rachel's handwriting, stowed it carefully away in his own pocket-book, and then grimly assisted Brooke to rise. By this time the servant was sitting up rubbing his head, and staring about him with the utmost dismay and astonishment. Simon turned towards him as Brooke began to stagger away.

"Get up," he said sternly, "and give your master your arm. He does not seem able to walk very well." Indeed Sir Walter was swaying like a drunken man.

The fellow obeyed, and the pair slowly retreated together, the yeoman, who had paused to pick up the cloak, bringing up the rear.

Thus the odd procession took its way out of the wood and across the bridge towards the chaise, the postboy turning round in his saddle and staring with unmitigated surprise. Brooke, whose face was as white as ashes, and whose teeth positively chattered, cast occasional uneasy

glances over his shoulder at this unwished for escort; but Simon stalked on, unheeding. Arrived at the vehicle the baronet tumbled rather than stepped in, and the groom clambered up behind; Fleetwood stood by, the while, and as Sir Walter sank back in his corner he tossed the cloak on to his knees.

"Remember my words," he said sternly. "Ride on, boy. Mind you carry this gentleman swiftly, for he is in haste to return to town."

"Curse you!" growled Sir Walter, banging to the door, and drawing up the window.

But the postboy set spurs to his horses, cracked his whip, and in a few moments the coach was out of sight.

CHAPTER XXII.

Say thou lov'st me while thou live,
I to thee my love will give.
Never dreaming to deceive
While that life endures.
Nay, and after death, in sooth,
I to thee will keep my truth,
As now, when in my May of youth,
This my love assures.

—OLD SONG.

WITH the paper in his pocket, which had been like to prove so costly to its writer, Simon crossed the wood again, and took his way quickly through the Charnleigh fields in the direction of a certain plantation, where Rachel had announced her intention of awaiting the result of the interview. As he drew near he saw her white-robed form leisurely threading its way through the fir trees, the level rays of the western sun defining every outline with a rim of gold. A light breeze lifted her curls, and set her ribbons dancing and fluttering; and he perceived, as she drew nearer, that her face wore an expression of pleased and eager curiosity. Simon, whose heart still burned within him at the remembrance of the pitfall recently dug for her, was conscious, at sight of this gay, careless figure, of a revulsion of feeling so strong that it almost overwhelmed him. Recognising Simon, Rachel began to run; pausing breathless a few paces away from him.

"Well," she cried eagerly, "what news—good or bad? Tell me quick."

"I have got your note," said Simon, taking it from his pocket-book and handing it to her.

"Why, that is good news," cried she. "Wherefore so solemn, Friend Simon? What a gloomy face! Come, let us see this document. My own paw sure enough—there is no mistaking it."

She tore the note into minute fragments, and scattered them in the air.

"There's an end of that," quoth she gaily.

"There might have been a very different end, madam," said Simon.

She looked at him quickly, and her face grew grave.

"You are in a serious mood, Mr. Fleetwood," said she. "You rather frighten me this afternoon. Was this interview then so very alarming? Come with me a little way through the wood—I vow you shall tell me all about it before I go home; otherwise I shall not rest for curiosity."

She turned as she spoke, and Simon answered quietly as he paced beside her:—

"In truth, I have every wish to tell you."

They walked along for a few moments in silence, and then Rachel turned to him:—

"Well, now, Mr. Fleetwood, let us hear the end of the story."

"The story might have ended in two ways," said Simon; "either would have been disastrous. You scribbled that note very easily, Miss Charnock—you destroyed it very lightly: you hardly knew, I think, what use might have been made of it."

"For Heaven's sake, do not be so solemn," interrupted Rachel pettishly. "I own to you that I should not have written it, and that I was very uncomfortable while it was in Sir Walter's keeping. What more do you want? Would you have me cry over it when you brought it back?"

"Indeed, that note might have caused you to shed

many tears," said the yeoman, still gravely. "Sir Walter had laid a very pretty snare, and intended to use it as a bait. He knew your wish to recover it; he also knew your anxiety to keep the knowledge of the business from your parents' ears; he counted on your being tempted to grant this interview. His intention was to persuade you to elope with him ——"

"Mercy!" broke in Rachel with a little scream; "why, I hate the sight of the creature!"

"Had you refused," continued Simon in the steady, even voice with which he had begun his explanation, "it was Sir Walter's intention to carry you forcibly away. In these days abductions are unfortunately not uncommon."

Rachel's eyes grew large with wonder and dismay, and her breath came quickly as she gazed at Simon.

"How do you know this?" she said after a pause.

"Madam, a post-chaise was drawn up in readiness near the corner of the wood; a man was concealed in the underwood, who, on Sir Walter's signal, rushed out with a great cloak with which to envelop you ——"

"Enough, enough!" cried Rachel. "My God, Simon, if I had gone instead of you! From what a fate have you saved me!" She was sobbing now, and much agitated. Simon waited in silence until she grew a little calmer, and she looked up presently with the great tears standing on her cheeks.

"Oh, Simon, you are right," she said. "I ought to hear it all, though your story fills me with pain and shame. You said it might have had another end; what was that?"

"I do not want to distress you," he said speaking very gently; "still, I believe it well that you should know. The story might have ended—it had very nearly ended—in my killing Sir Walter Brooke. The rage which

came upon me when I realised his villainy was so great that for a moment it deprived me of reason; but, thank God! I came to myself before it was too late. Think well, Miss Charnock," he went on, his voice hardening again, "think well, when next you are diverting yourself with your fashionable friends, what consequences a frolic may have."

"Do not call these people my friends!" cried Rachel. "I cannot bear to think of them. I believe that you are the only true friend I have in the world."

She gazed at him pleadingly, and seeing that his face did not relax, for indeed the very depths of his emotion lent it an expression of sternness, she began to weep again very piteously.

"Oh, Simon, do not be harsh with me; my heart will break if you do not forgive me."

"Forgive you!" said Simon, standing still, and looking down at her. "Alas! what right have I ——" he broke off quickly. "I would lay down my life for you," he went on, with seeming irrelevance; "I would give my heart's blood to save you from harm."

"I believe it," said Rachel. She raised her eyes, still wet with tears, and gazed at him earnestly.

"Simon," she said, "you know the best and the worst of me. You are so strong and good yourself I believe that you could make me good too. Will you help me?"

"Do you know what you are saying?" said Simon, and his great frame began to shake like a reed in the wind. "How can I help you, how can I be anything to you unless ——"

"Unless?" repeated Rachel with a little tremulous, tearful smile, as she stretched out two small wavering hands with a gesture at once gracious and confiding. "Simon, you are the only man I have ever known that

I could trust with all my heart. If you want me, take me."

And Simon straightway took her—into his strong arms; then, half frightened at his own temerity, he would have loosed her, but that she clung to him, half laughing and half weeping. "Keep me safe, Simon," she murmured; "hold me fast. I only feel safe with you. Tell me that you love me, Simon! You have never told me yet that you love me."

"Have I not told you, sweetheart?" said Simon in a voice that scarcely sounded like his own. "Oh, love, I can find no words to tell you, but you know."

"Yes, I know," said Rachel. "I have known a long time. Sometimes when I have felt sick at heart yonder in town—there were times, I can tell you, Simon, when I hated myself and everybody else—I have thought of you, with your good calm face, and said to myself that here was a proper man; and then I have thought of your life amid the green fields, and the dumb innocent things that love you, and of your home so peaceful and pleasant, and I have wondered to myself if there might not be greater happiness to be found there than in——" she paused, blushing.

"Ah, love," said Simon, "you need not finish. I know well that you had far more brilliant prospects before you. But before God, I swear that if love, faithful, devoted worship, can make a woman happy, you shall be happy as my wife."

While they were standing thus lost to the sense of everything but their own young ecstasy, the quick light tread of a woman's foot sounded close to them, and Madam Charnock's voice was heard calling, "Rachel! Rachel!"

Starting and blushing the girl released herself from Simon's embrace, and would have withdrawn a few paces

away but that he gently took her hand and passed it through his arm.

"Let there be no concealment," he said quietly.

And Rachel blushed more deeply, and murmured penitently that he was right.

Madam Charnock stopped short, as she caught sight of the two figures advancing to meet her; she drew in her breath with a little gasp, and pressed her hands to her bosom. Who can tell what varied emotions passed through her heart during the few moments that elapsed before the pair stood beside her? There were tears in her eyes, and her face was very pale, as she looked from one to the other.

"Simon and I have something to tell you, ma'am," said Rachel; and then suddenly breaking away from her lover she flung her arms about her mother's neck.

"Ah, little Mother, you want me to be happy, don't you? You want me to be happy and good. I can be neither unless you promise to let me marry Simon."

Madam Charnock gently loosed the clinging arms, and looked gravely and sorrowfully first at her daughter and then at the tall yeoman.

"So it has come to this?" she said.

"Yes, madam," returned Simon, "I have won my prize."

"Ah, Mother dearest, do not look so sad!" broke in Rachel. "What can you want more than that I should be happy? Will you not like to know that I am safe here, almost under your wing still, though in the care of this good, true man. Come, Mamma, you know that Simon is good and true."

"My dear child," said Mrs. Charnock, "Simon is all that you say, and for a long time I have known of his love for you. But now I feel as if it came upon me as a surprise. I scarcely thought that you, Rachel ——"

She paused, and went on hurriedly:—

"I thought you were more ambitious. I will own that I myself have often planned and dreamed a brilliant future for you—not of late years," she added, looking deprecatingly at Simon. "Such a future might not, as you say, have brought you happiness, my dear, and I must needs rejoice in whatever secures that—and now it will be sweet to have you near me—but still—still ——"

Her voice faltered suddenly, and she burst into tears.

"I can understand very well," said Simon compassionately, and indeed comprehending and sympathising with the world of cherished traditions, of tender ambitions, and of by-gone dreams that prompted those tears.

"Worldly little Mother!" cried the girl, taking Madam Charnock in her arms again, and kissing away her tears. "You would have had me marry a rich man with a squint, perhaps, or an old nobleman who might have got tipsy every day and beaten me. Ah, ma'am, let me tell you, I am better away from fashionable folk. My one glimpse of society has been enough for me." She was serious now, and went on more timidly. "I have been a bad girl—wild and foolish and deceitful. I meant to have kept it all from you, but I will have done with concealment henceforth. I got myself into a sad scrape lately, and only this day was in great peril; but Simon has extricated me from both."

Thereupon, clinging tightly to her mother, and helped out by an occasional kindly word from Simon when she spoke too harshly of her own conduct, she related the whole history of her recent escapade, ending up with a little burst of enthusiasm over her lover's part in the affair. Though Mrs. Charnock was startled and grieved, she did not reproach the girl; and extended her hand to Simon with real gratitude and cordiality.

"I do not thank you," she said, "for rescuing one who is as precious to you as to me. Oh, Simon, to think that she should have been in such peril—she whom I have ever watched over so anxiously. You have driven that man away, you say, but he may give us more trouble yet. Who knows what he may say, what vile colouring he may give to the story! Oh, Rachel, to think that you should have exposed yourself to this!"

"Nay, madam," interposed Simon quickly, "I think the gentleman will keep quiet enough. He went away, I assure you, in great fear of me; and, moreover, it will be to his interest to keep private a matter in which he has played so foolish and discreditable a part."

"And, indeed, ma'am, you must not shake your head over me any more," cried the girl, "for I have been scolded enough already, I assure you. Simon, there, was so severe with me that I was obliged, in self-defence, to ask if he would like to marry me."

Fleetwood threw out his hand quickly as though to check her. The essential modesty of love belonged to him.

Madam Charnock, ever quick in her perceptions, divined and sympathised with his feeling, and liked him better in that moment than she had ever done before.

"Well, Simon," she said, stretching out her hand to him kindly, "I suppose this was meant to be, and I can truly say I am glad this wild child of mine is to be held in such safe keeping. I give you joy, my dears."

"That is right," exclaimed Rachel. "You feel like me, Mother dear, that I shall be safe with Simon. He loves me, in spite of my faults; do you not, Simon?"

"I love you the more for them," said Simon, "since they make me necessary to you."

"Now, listen to him!" cried Rachel with a pretended pout. "Any man with a spark of gallantry would have

said I had no faults; but this honest fellow in the first hour of his wooing must needs twit me with them. Nay, I am but jesting; at heart I am proud of you just as you are. Oh, Mother, if you knew the blessing of leaning against this rock of truth after being tossed about as I have been lately in that whirlpool yonder. Here is one who could not deceive me if he were to try."

Mrs. Charnock shot a sudden, eager glance at Fleetwood, but he had no eyes for her, and her earnest scrutiny could detect no change in his face except that the words of his beloved brought the colour to his bronzed cheek, and seemed to lend a certain element of shy tenderness to the rapture already patent.

"Now, children, children," she said after a pause, "we must not go too fast. We must make sure of our ground before we begin to build our castle. What about Papa, Rachel?"

Though she addressed her daughter, her eyes were still fixed on Simon.

"Oh, Papa will come round in time," returned Rachel. "Simon must not mind if he is a little disagreeable at first."

"I think the Squire will not withhold his consent," said the yeoman quietly, "when he sees that it is really his daughter's wish. I will go up to the Hall to-night and speak to him."

Madam Charnock continued to gaze at him dubiously.

"I scarcely think that you will be well received; but still, perhaps it is better to lay the case before him at once. I, at least, will be your friend."

"I thank you with all my heart," said Simon, taking the hand which she extended to him and holding it a moment in his strong, earnest clasp.

"Blessed, blessed woman!" cried Rachel; "now all

is sure to go well. My father always comes round to your view in the end."

She continued to prattle gaily until they reached the house; and then, at a hint from her mother, retired upstairs, while the lady herself accompanied Simon into the study.

Mr. Charnock was standing at the window, apparently on the look out for them.

"Well, ma'am, I was wondering what had become of you. Ha! you have brought our good friend Fleetwood with you, I see. Met him prowling round the fields, as usual, I suppose? Never was there such a model of activity and diligence. Stay and have a game, Simon, and a bit of supper afterwards."

"No, sir, I cannot stay to-night. I merely wish to see you for a few moments: I have something to announce to you."

"Indeed?" said the Squire, drawing his brows together, and coming forward into the room; "I am at a loss to know what you can have to say to me, Mr. Fleetwood."

"I have to tell you, sir, that this day your daughter has promised to be my wife."

Mr. Charnock swore a fine round oath, and strode nearer to the young man, glowering at him savagely.

"Promised, sir? What do you mean by *promised?* A chit like that has no power to dispose of herself. Do you think I am mad, that I would allow my only child to mate with such as you?"

"Sir," said Simon, "you gave me leave to take my chance like any other man. I have, thank God, succeeded."

"Be silent, sir," roared the Squire. "What! Do you think because I am indebted to you for a few paltry thousands that you have in consequence a claim upon me? You have nothing of the kind, let me tell you. I could have done with you to-morrow, if I chose to pay

you off. I have a mind to do it, too. You want putting in your place, Master Simon."

Mr. Charnock appeared to consider that the mere utterance of this abortive threat should be in itself sufficient to quell the audacious suitor, and there was a certain element of triumph in his vindictive glare; but Simon did not flinch.

"Your paying me off, Mr. Charnock, would in no way alter the case. Your compact with me has served its purpose, and can no longer affect the matter one way or the other. It was a stepping-stone which brought me to her level, and may be done away with now. As your son-in-law, I shall, of course, continue to work for you, more gladly and willingly than ever."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Mr. Charnock, "my son-in-law! How you can stand by, madam," he added, suddenly turning on his wife, "how you can listen in patience to the fellow's insolence is more than I can conceive. Pray, is he the husband whom you would choose for your daughter?"

"Nay, I would not have chosen him," said Mrs. Charnock; "but the Power which guides our lives is stronger and wiser than we. I believe that this is the man who is designed by God to be our Rachel's husband. Nay, my dear," she went on, as the Squire would have interrupted her impatiently, "we cannot interfere now; things have gone too far—you cannot in honour draw back. Let us make the best of it. He is a good man—a gentleman in the best sense of the word—and we shall keep our child near us."

"Upon my word, you go very fast," retorted Mr. Charnock. "You have settled it all, it seems. Pray, may I ask, does Rachel know all about the business? Does she know of the mean way this precious lover of hers has wormed himself among us?"

Mrs. Charnock bent a startled, eager glance on Simon, who remained, however, perfectly composed.

"I could not tell her," he said simply. "You know I gave you my word, Mr. Charnock, not to drop a hint of it to any one."

"Well, and you'll please to keep your word," cried the Squire inconsequently. "By ——, I must have been mad to stoop to such folly. But how could I believe you'd be so base as to take advantage of my straits? There, go, go—get out of my sight! I must have time to think over this."

"I will be patient," said Simon. "Take as much time as you like, sir. I do not believe that you will break your promise, nor can I think you would thwart your only child."

He left the room, then, Madam Charnock accompanying him to the house door.

"I would," she said somewhat wistfully as they paused upon the threshold, "I would Rachel knew the whole of this. If she should come to hear of it later I fear she will think your silence strange."

"She cannot think it strange," he replied, "for I will, of course, explain how I was bound. You see, the Squire still insists on silence; and it would be a pity to anger him further now. But it scarcely matters after all. She would care as little as I how we were brought together so that we were united in the end."

Seeing him so happy and untroubled, the lady forbore to give voice to her own fears; but her face still wore a doubtful expression as she withdrew into the house.

CHAPTER XXIII.

It was a lover, and his lass,
With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino,
That o'er the green cornfields did pass.
—SHAKESPEARE.

SLEEP was long in coming to Simon that night, and though at last bodily fatigue overcame mental excitement, he would start from his slumbers every now and then with a great throb of joy: "Rachel loves me! Rachel is mine!" He did not ask himself if he were dreaming, for in truth our dreams only cheat us in minor matters; great happiness, like great sorrow, dominates our consciousness when we sleep as well as when we wake. The reigning joy or grief is enthroned, as it were, in the background of our mind, while our dream-fancies sport with us; and even while we dally with these shadowy visions we are aware that the reality will still hold court when they melt away. Simon knew his happiness was no dream, and yet it seemed to him so marvellous, so extraordinary, that he could scarce comprehend how it had come to pass.

He had said of Rachel once that she was as much above him as the stars of heaven; he had thought of her in later days as a prize, within reach, indeed, but one that would be long withheld; and now, behold! of her own free will she had come to him—she had given herself to him, she had told him that she loved him. No wonder that the very inmost depths of his being were stirred with almost incredulous delight.

All that day he went about his work in a kind of maze of rapture, busy with the thought of Rachel, though he deemed it more discreet to keep away from the Hall. Whithersoever he went, her image hovered before him; the very beat of his footsteps seemed to mark time to the song which filled his heart—*Love, love, love, love.* He came home a little earlier than usual, and stood a moment looking round the oak parlour, as though this strange new bliss of his changed even its familiar aspect.

By-and-bye, however, he began to identify, with a little thrill of pleasure, sundry of the homely articles of furniture which might be associated with her presence. She had once mirrored her pretty face in the great table—he laid his hand caressingly on it now; yonder was the chair on which she had sat on the day he had first beheld her in all her maidenly beauty—his father's chair—a throne for blessed memories! A throne too, for no less blessed and tender hopes. At some not far distant day, perhaps, it might be that coming home at such an hour as this, he would find her installed in it, busy with some dainty piece of work; and going up softly he would bend over it, and she, leaning back, would tilt up her exquisite face—he saw it all. Then, when they had talked together for a little while, he would wheel it for her to the head of the table, where she would preside, mistress of his house, queen of his heart. O, Rachel, Rachel!

He was standing, still lost in happy contemplation, when a light tap on the window-pane made him start and look round. Lo! his Beloved stood without, even as he had stood on that memorable evening which had been but now in his thoughts, gazing in upon him, as once he had gazed at her. The ruddy afternoon sun which was firing those narrow panes shed a glory round her watchful figure, lending even a transient glow to the curling rings of her dark

hair; her small face, bent eagerly forward, was lit up, too, with a smile half mischievous and half tender, and her eyes were bright, but yet had a softness in them which he had never seen before. Uttering a cry he hastened to the window; but at his approach she made a little airy sign towards the house-door, and thereupon vanished. A moment later he met her on the threshold.

"I scarce liked to knock," she explained. "Your servants might have been scandalised at your receiving a visit from a lady. But in truth, Mr. Fleetwood, since you would not come to ask how I did to-day, I thought I would pay *you* a little attention."

"Ah," said Simon with a long breath, "I did not dare to go to the Hall, but if you knew how I have been longing!"

"Oh, what a big sigh!" she cried, laughing. "It carries conviction with it. Well, to say the truth, you have done wisely in keeping away to-day, for the atmosphere yonder is stormy, Simon, distinctly stormy. My father glares at Mamma, and will not speak to me at all. No, do not look so troubled, the clouds will pass away in time. Even this one," she added gaily, "has a silver lining. If Papa had been as conversational as usual our dinner would not have been over so soon, and I should not have been able to come to see you. So let us be thankful for that."

By this time they had entered the parlour, and Rachel glanced round it almost as Simon had done.

"Dear old room!" she cried. "How little I thought the first evening when I took refuge here from the rain that it was to be my home. Do you remember that evening, Simon?"

"I was thinking of it the very moment that you came," said he.

"Were you, indeed? and was that why you were

smiling to yourself? You were so absorbed you did not hear my first tap. I had been watching you quite a long time before you saw me. Were you thinking about me, Simon?"

The colour in her cheeks had deepened, and her voice was very soft and caressing.

"I was even thinking about you," returned he, "which must, I am sure, surprise you very much."

He spoke half jestingly, but with the vibration in his voice which Rachel had learned to connect with deep emotion; and stretched out his hand the while, half timidly, half reverently, to touch her curls.

"I, too, was thinking of that blessed night which brought you to me first—here to my home—and of how, when I looked in and saw you standing by my hearth, I thought ——"

"What did you think?" said she, as he paused. Her eyes were downcast, so that the long black lashes almost rested on the cheeks in which the happy rose was ever deepening.

"I can hardly tell you what I thought," went on Simon. "I only know that my heart went out to you."

"And that is more than two years ago—a long time to keep a man's heart! You have not had mine for so long a time—does it grieve you to know that?"

"No, sweet: nothing grieves me so that I have it now."

Rachel was proceeding to define the exact moment when she had first detected that her heart was wandering in Simon's direction when the door suddenly opened and Dolly, who had been about to enter with a tray, started back, aghast at sight of the visitor. Rachel had skipped a little further away from her lover, and now fell to laughing and clapping her hands.

"Why, nothing is wanting, I do declare," she cried. "If your poor dear aunt were alive, we might think our-

selves back in the past. I have had my dinner, you know, Mr. Fleetwood, but I should vastly fancy a little damson cheese; and if you would give me a cup of tea, I should be grateful."

It need scarcely be said that Simon delightedly agreed, desiring Dolly to set down the tray, and get out the best teapot without delay.

"And you may send away that jug of beer, Mr. Simon," observed Rachel, "for I insist that you shall drink tea to keep me company. I may make it, may I not? Indeed, you should see what excellent tea I brew."

A further order being given to the effect that Susan must on no account attempt to make the tea, Dolly withdrew with very round eyes and a broad smile. Much whispering and hurrying to and fro could now be heard through the partially open door, and presently Susan herself appeared, wreathed with smiles, and bearing aloft the silver teapot; followed by Dolly carrying on a small tray all further requisites.

The sight of the old woman's curious and excited face, the significant glances which she cast from one to the other, and the ecstatic warmth with which, having carefully polished her hand on her apron, she shook that which the girl kindly extended to her, was too much for Rachel.

"I must positively tell Susan," she cried; and then, without waiting for Simon's reply, went on, laughing:—

"Susan, I have come to see your master because I think he wants cheering up—indeed, he is so dull and lonely here that I believe I shall soon have to come here for good."

"Ma'am!" cried Susan, and fell to clapping her hands and rocking herself backwards and forwards, and laughing and crying together; while Dolly from the background kept up a rapturous and continuous murmur to the effect that it was "a lovely match—it was that. It was a

beautiful match—a body couldn't wish to see a nicer. It was a gradely match, aye, that it was!"

At length, after Rachel had actually kissed her, the old woman was so much overcome that she was obliged to retire with her apron to her face, the underling escorting her, and assuring her that she oughtn't to be that taken-to when such a match was going for'ard.

Then Simon wheeled forward the chair; and Rachel took her place, as he had pictured, at the head of the table, with a little demure air which charmed him mightily.

"Now sit you down," said she; "you must not wait on me any more. This is going to be a rehearsal, Simon. Imagine, if you please, that I am already Mrs. Fleetwood —no, no, stay where you are! You and I are staid old married folk, and there is no need for transports. Now Farmer Fleetwood has come home after a long day in the fields. He is tired, and glad to rest. He has put on the slippers which Mrs. Farmer Fleetwood has thoughtfully left ready for him in the hall. Pray don't interrupt—I know a farmer's wife should have her husband's slippers ready for him. (We must imagine that part of the performance has been gone through, however.) So the Gaffer—isn't that the proper title?—draws nigh to the table tired and hungry, and the Missus, having made his tea most beautifully and just as he likes it, now proceeds to pour it out. 'Two lumps, my dear? Cream?' I do not know that on butter-making days I shall be able to spare any cream; I mean my dairy to be a model, do you know, Simon? Yes, indeed, I intend to be a notable housewife; do not think, sir, that you will have a frivolous being for your wife. Not at all; I mean to do my share of the work, I can tell you. No, you must not leave your chair, my poor tired husband—I will bring your tea to you."

She quitted her place, as she spoke, and came round the table carefully carrying the brimming cup. The look upon his face may be imagined, the love with which he caught and kissed her hand; but it would be difficult to describe the strange and sweet admixture of feelings with which he suffered the object of his worship to minister to him. In the ideal marriage the wife must be in very truth a helpmeet, "A spirit, yet a woman too". The most chivalrous tenderness, the most passionate devotion on the husband's part, does not prevent his gladly admitting this division of labour, this sharing of duties. Were it otherwise, indeed, something would be wanting to the full blessedness of the union. Rachel's attitude towards Simon this evening brought to him a fortaste of that blessedness; he had hitherto dreamed of serving her, of devoting himself to her, and now, the mere fact of her waiting upon him, half in play though it was, opened to him a whole world of new delights, of deeper tendernesses.

The moments sped all too quickly until Madam Charnock came, half alarmed, and half vexed, to look for her daughter; and though she chid her gently the mere sight of the radiant faces caused her trouble to melt away; and she, too, drank a cup of Rachel's tea, and walked with the lovers among the roses afterwards; and finally suffered Simon to escort her and Rachel homewards till within a stone's throw of their own door. There taking leave of them, he walked back through the dewy dusk, his steps once more keeping time to the song his soul was singing; and when he reached the room all perfumed with the memory of her presence, he threw himself upon his knees and thanked God with a full heart for his great happiness.

Rachel came no more alone to his house, though sometimes she paid him little visits accompanied by her

mother, and hardly a day passed that they did not meet, either out of doors or at the Hall. Simon, strong in the belief of his own rights, betook himself there boldly from time to time, and was not denied admittance, though the Squire scowled when he met him, and returned his greeting with scant civility. Mr. Charnock's mood at this time was anything but pleasant; he could not be brought to admit the justice of the yeoman's claim, but durst not, for very shame's sake, dismiss it altogether. He snarled at his wife, and glared at Rachel, seldom speaking to her unless to gibe at her low-born lover.

"Papa is really very disagreeable," she said to Simon one day. "I wish he would go away from home for a little—he is quite unbearable now. I am not so fond of my father as I was," she added with a laugh.

Simon and she were walking up and down in the sunny garden at Charnleigh Hall, sheltered from curious eyes by the tall yew hedge that was its owner's special pride. As she spoke she thrust out her hand towards one of the stately hollyhocks which stood primly in a row on the other side of the path, and, drawing it towards her, began idly to pick off the rosette-like blooms. As Simon did not speak, she glanced mischievously at him over her shoulder, and suddenly tossed one of these blooms right into his face.

"There, Mr. Sage, that is to make you laugh. I felt your disapproving glance right at the back of my head; but you see there is no use in my pretending—I do not feel particularly fond of my father at present; and as for you, my poor Simon, I am sure you have no cause to love him. He knows very well he will have to consent in the end, therefore why need he keep us on the rack?"

All this while she had been toying absently with the

flowers, placing one in her bosom, coaxing another, with divers petulant little pats, to remain in her dark locks just above her ear. Simon could not repress a smile at the contrast between her words and her actual employment.

"Is it not a very pleasant rack, love?" he said, drawing her gently to him. "For my part, I can well endure it."

"Upon my word you take the matter coolly," retorted she, twisting herself away from him. "I thought it was the proper thing for a lover to be distraught until the day, at least, was fixed. I own I cannot be quite happy until I feel that no one has the power to part us."

"Who can part us since you are willing to give yourself to me?" said Simon. "We must be patient for a little while, and then all will go well: when two love each other as we do, it is not in the power of man to come between them. You know, without my telling you, how I long for the moment which will make you absolutely mine, but meanwhile—I am very happy."

Rachel took the hollyhock out of her hair, and going close to Simon attempted to fasten it in the buttonhole of his coat. Needless to say the short stem afforded no support, and it tumbled out again into the hand which she held ready to receive it. She repeated this manœuvre several times, apparently absorbed in it, and finally remarked most irrelevantly, still with her eyes on the blossom:—

"If Sir Walter Brooke had succeeded in carrying me off, I suppose he would have taken me to Gretna Green?"

The young man in question was the last person of whom Simon would have been likely to think at that moment, and Rachel's reference to him gave him a little shock of unpleasant surprise. The indulgent smile with

which he had been looking down at the girl left his face, and he answered somewhat stiffly:—

"It is possible; but I see no object in recalling that very painful episode."

"The subject is as unpleasant to me as to you, as you may suppose," said Rachel; "but all the same, I have been thinking about it lately. 'Twould have been very disagreeable, to be sure, to have been obliged to run away with such a monster, but if it were somebody else, Simon—just think! If it were a man whom I could love and trust with all my soul—if it were you, for instance, who wanted me to run away with you, only fancy how exciting it would be! Nay, but think of it, you and I together in a post-chaise, flying away from our pursuers—papa, I suppose, in his worst mood—well, perhaps not papa, let us say Humphrey—it would be good fun to outwit Humphrey, wouldn't it? Now, you must own that the experience would be very entertaining."

Simon imprisoned the little hand which was again toying with his buttonhole, and held it fast.

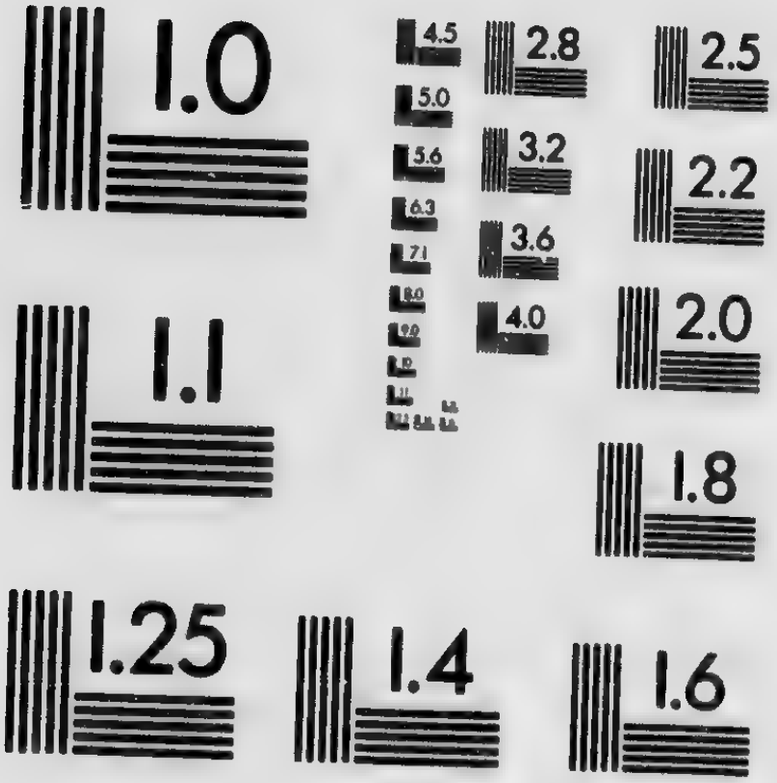
"Nay," he said; "I would not have our wedded life begin without God's blessing, Rachel. I would have our marriage take place in our old church here, where I have so often prayed that God would give you to me—ah, if you knew how I have dreamt of it! Some day, sweetheart, we shall be married there, and you and I will walk quietly together afterwards to our home."

"Oh, oh—what a prosy old Simon! So that is your notion? Confess mine is much more original. Think of the excitement—stealing away in the early morning, and getting far on our way before the hue and cry began, and then galloping, galloping, keeping ever ahead of our pursuers. I should like them to come rather near, near enough to make our hearts beat fast; but we should give them the slip in the end, and be man and wife before



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they could come up with us. To my mind it would be glorious."

Simon looked at her in silence, and with a smile which, if somewhat startled, was still indulgent. After a moment she said in an altered tone :—

"I have shocked you, have I not? You did not think I could be unmaidenly."

"It is not in you to be unmaidenly," he returned, very kindly. "If you are a little childish now and then, I do not find it hard to forgive you."

"Do you call it childishness?" said she musingly; "well, perhaps. Since you forgive me you may call it what you will."

CHAPTER XXIV.

Alack, what heinous sin is it in me,
To be ashamed to be my father's child.
But though I am a daughter to his blood,
I am not to his manners; O Lorenzo,
If thou keep promise I shall end this strife.
. . . . . .
But love is blind, and lovers cannot see
The pretty follies that themselves commit.

—SHAKESPEARE.

AFFAIRS were still in an uncertain state when they were unexpectedly brought to a crisis by the sudden summons of Mrs. Charnock to the dying bed of her aged mother. A passionate attachment had always existed between the two, though of late years they had only seen each other at long intervals; and Madam prepared to set out without delay. Her anguish and anxiety were increased by the unsatisfactory position in which Rachel found herself. At the latter's earnest request, and in obedience to the promptings of her own heart, Mrs. Charnock took courage to remonstrate with her husband before leaving, and succeeded in extorting from him an unwilling recognition of the engagement. Relieved, and almost joyful in spite of her sadness, she hastened to impart the tidings to her daughter.

"He consents, Rachel," she said; "ah, child, your father has a warm heart—you must not misjudge him. He cannot bear, he says, to add to my anxiety, and so he gives leave for Simon to visit you here during my absence as your acknowledged suitor; and promises to talk about the wedding on my return. He is writing

this very day to break the tidings to his brother. So now, my little one, you are satisfied, are you not? You must be patient and discreet while I am away; be content with seeing Simon here, and do not go to his house, or you will set people talking."

Rachel dutifully promised to be all that her parents could wish. She felt a real sorrow for her mother's impending loss, and grieved to see her set forth on her long journey with so heavy a heart; yet nevertheless she could not altogether repress her own natural joy at the turn affairs were taking.

After the departure of his wife, whom, no doubt he loved in his own fashion, often as he tried her, the Squire relapsed into his former morose state; he would often sit opposite his daughter at meals without vouchsafing a single remark to her, and only responding in gruff monosyllables to her occasional utterances. One morning, however, on coming down to breakfast, he astonished her by a query:—

"Did your mother say anything to you, before she left, with reference to this ridiculous engagement of yours?"

"She said, sir, that you had been good enough to consent to it," responded Rachel promptly, but colouring with surprise and alarm behind her tea urn.

"Humph!" said Mr. Charnock, "she needn't have been in such a prodigious hurry. I am not so sure that I can allow it now. Read what your uncle says."

Rachel picked up the letter, which he tossed to her, and perused it with burning cheeks. Mr. John Charnock described in no measured terms the indignant astonishment with which he had read his brother's letter, his sense of the disgrace that such an alliance must bring upon the whole family, his utter inabilty to conceive how the head of the house could possibly countenance

such an act of mad folly. He set forth the brilliancy of the prospects to which so beautiful and accomplished a young woman as his niece was naturally entitled, and wound up by declaring that he, on his part, was determined to leave no stone unturned to avert the impending catastrophe. If, he added, pecuniary embarrassments were at the bottom of this extraordinary affair, then he himself was willing to come forward to save the family honour, and to prevent the name of Charnock being trampled in the dust. As he was unfortunately laid up with an attack of gout, he could not attend his brother in person, but intended to dispatch his son Humphrey without delay to represent him at Charnleigh Hall. Rachel read the paper through, folded it, and returned it to her father.

"Evidently," she said, with flashing eyes, "my uncle supposes he can bribe you to break your word. Surely, sir, you will let him know that it is not possible for a Charnock to be bought over."

She was prepared for some testy response, but not for the fury which was evoked by her words. Mr. Charnock grew purple in the face, and was for a moment unable to speak. By-and-bye, however, the power of utterance returned to him, and he stormed at the girl after a manner which would have alarmed a less high-spirited damsel. But it merely served to lash Rachel into a very pretty rage. She tapped her foot at some of her father's invectives, while other's called forth glances that seemed positively to flame. The Squire ended by ordering her to leave the room, and not suffer him to see her undutiful face again that day.

Rachel accordingly retired to her room in high dudgeon, and sat by her window for a long time, with burning cheeks, and a heart that throbbed almost to suffocation. She had passed an hour or two in vengeful

meditation when she suddenly caught sight of Simon's figure advancing towards the house, and was preparing to descend to the drawing-room, when, to her surprise, she saw him going away again. Instantly the conviction flashed upon her that her father had ordered admittance to be refused to him; and without pausing to assume her hat, or even to ascertain if her surmise were correct, she flew downstairs and out of the house in pursuit of him. But his long strides had carried him half way through one of the plantations before she came up with him. At the sound of her hasty footfalls he turned, and rapidly retraced his steps.

"I was told you could not see me," he said.

"Oh, Simon," cried Rachel vehemently, "they want to part us! I always felt that our happiness could not last. Humphrey will never rest until he has come between us."

"Humphrey!" ejaculated Simon.

"Oh, it is all spite and jealousy on his part," cried Rachel, "and pride and meddlesomeness on the part of my uncle. My uncle has written to Papa, Simon; he is furious at the notion of our marriage. Humphrey is coming here at once to remonstrate with my father. Between them I know they will get round him. If dear Mamma were here she would take our part, but Heaven knows when she will return. My father often vacillates, but he is obstinate, too; and once he gets a notion thoroughly into his head there is no moving him. He has some weaknesses, besides—weaknesses which I cannot bear to touch on even to you. Oh, I feel that this is the beginning of the end—they will not rest until they tear us apart."

"But that cannot be, love," said Simon quietly; "they cannot part us, let them do what they will. Your father and mother have both given their consent—it cannot be now revoked for a mere whim."

"But if my father will not let us marry?"

Simon's face was fixed and stern.

"We are pledged to each other," he said. "If your father breaks his bond that is no reason why we should break ours."

"Ah, my brave loyal Simon! Oh, what a blessing it is to feel that one may cleave to something so strong and true." She clasped both hands upon his arm, and looked earnestly into his face.

"Simon," she went on, "you are my true lover; you are to be my husband—between you and me there should be no reserves, no pretence. I am going to tell you plainly what is my mind, and you will listen to my words in the spirit in which I speak them."

Her face was illuminated by some great, almost overpowering emotion, her voice trembled, but she kept her eyes fixed unflinchingly on his face.

"Humphrey comes to-morrow," she went on; "I know him very well, and you may believe me when I tell you that if it is in the power of man to part us he will do so. But we must make it impossible for him to part us, and we can do that only ——"

She broke off, and suddenly hid her face on his shoulder.

"We can do that by cleaving steadfastly to each other," said Simon.

"There is a better way," she cried, with her face still hidden; "a sure, prompt way of putting an end for ever to this uncertainty. We must be — married before Humphrey comes."

"Ah, love, that would indeed be a delightful way out of the difficulty, but I fear me it is scarcely possible. No one in this neighbourhood would marry us without your father's consent, and it could not be done so quickly. Your cousin comes to-morrow, you say?"

"Oh, Simon, how dull you are! Of course, I do not expect to be married here. You must take me away—take me to Scotland this very day, Simon. We could be over the border to-morrow morning, and married fast and safe before Humphrey arrives here."

There was a moment's silence, Rachel not daring to look up, but marking, in the midst of her confusion, how fast and loud beat the heart near which her head was pillowed.

"Do you not see," she went on in muffled tones, "how easily we could do it? Why, it is scarce more than eighty miles from here to Gretna Green. We should come back bound to each other for ever more—no one could attempt to part us, and we could be married in church afterwards, you know."

Still silence, save for that eloquent beating of Simon's heart; by-and-bye Rachel twisted round her face a little and peered up at his, and read, amid all its passionate tenderness, evidence of some inward struggle.

"Why do you hesitate?" she broke out quickly. "Oh, Simon, do you not see how your hesitation humiliates me. You will risk nothing for me; you do not love me as I love you."

"My dear," said Simon, "it is because I love you so much that I hesitate. I would risk anything in the wide world for the happiness of calling you mine, except your precious self. Oh, I have no words to tell you what I think of your sweet trust—but for that very reason I shrink from taking advantage of it. You are so sacred to me, I would have everything about you sacred in the eyes of the world as well as in my own. I would not have it in the power of any one to condemn your conduct. You are so innocent, so confiding—but I, who am older and wiser, should take care of you."

"Simon," said Rachel, "I am quite old enough to

know my own mind, and I understand very well what is needful for my happiness. I know I could not endure the anxiety and uncertainty of such an engagement as ours is likely to be—secret, if we are to be engaged at all; dragging on for Heaven knows how long—and I am very sure that I shall be safe and happy as your wife. Therefore have done with scruples. If you would like to marry me take me away this evening."

Then, as he looked down at the beautiful glowing face, Simon forgot everything but that the highest good which life could offer was, if he chose, to be his beyond the possibility of recall. It was within his grasp, how could he but choose to secure it? The unfair treatment he had received seemed to justify the proposed plan of action, and if he had any lingering qualms they were speedily overpowered by the pleadings of his great love.

It was therefore hurriedly decided that Simon should meet Rachel at the corner of the wood near his house—the self-same in which Mrs. Charnock had once been like to lose her life—at eight o'clock that evening, and should drive her thence to Preston, where they would exchange the gig for a post-chaise. Travelling all night they would easily accomplish the journey to Gretna Green—a distance of between seventy and eighty miles—before the following morning was far advanced; and, having gone through the formalities which were to bind them irrevocably to each other, would be on their way home almost before their flight was discovered. It was possible, indeed, that the whole affair might be kept secret, and that the quiet religious ceremony which the young people hoped would follow these irregular proceedings might be the only intimation which the world would receive of their union.

When Rachel left him, Simon returned home, his heart throbbing tumultuously and his brain in a whirl.

Surely never was there a day so long in passing; but at length the time was at hand. His best and fleetest horse was harnessed to the gig, and a plentiful supply of rugs stowed away beneath the seat, together with a soft warm cloak, which he added as an afterthought. It had belonged to his mother, and, as he took it from the lavender-scented cupboard and shook out the folds, he handled it with a curious reverent tenderness, partly on her account, partly because it was now to enfold Rachel. This last consideration seemed to make the fact of the nearness of their union more real to him. In less than twenty-four hours she would be his wife; thenceforth his would be the exclusive right of supplying all her needs: the food she ate, the clothes she wore would be provided by him. Delightful thought! Precious privileges! Rachel the star, the queen, the sweetheart, was now to be Rachel the wife.

The simple household of the Farm retired early, being generally astir as soon as it was light in the morning; Simon, therefore, knew that his absence would not in all probability be discovered until breakfast time on the morrow.

At the appointed place, Rachel stood waiting for him, darting out from behind a tree as he reined up his horse.

"Everything is prospering with us," she cried gleefully, as she sprang up beside him. "My father, you must know, banished me from his presence for the day, so I dined alone, and then went to my room, telling my maid I should not require her again to-night. She thinks I have gone to bed—Papa imagines I am repenting in bitterness of spirit. Nothing will be discovered until to-morrow morning, and then most likely they will think I have only just made my escape, for I took care not to date the letter I wrote to Papa—I thought it best to write, you know, telling him what we were doing, so that

he need not raise a great hue and cry about me—and I rumpled up my bed so that it will look as if I slept in it. Altogether, you see, I have been very clever. And now, while they all think me so differently engaged, here I am flying away with you, Simon."

Simon felt a passing twinge at Rachel's first words, for deceit was naturally hateful to him; but the mere sight of her laughing happy face, the triumphant sense of possession, the consciousness of her whole-hearted dependence on him, speedily dispelled his qualms, and his exhilaration increased as they sped rapidly onwards. After all he too was young, and love was sweet; and at that moment the mere fact of existence delightful.

It was a lovely evening, warm, yet with a sparkle in the air. As they flew past woods and across common and moorland sweet spicy scents of pine and heather greeted their nostrils. The sun set all in a glory, and the clear summer twilight made of the familiar country a mysterious and wonderful land. Now they were far away from the neighbourhood of Charnleigh, and the horse, settling down to a swift steady trot, swung them rapidly over the coaching road which led to Preston. The twilight changed its aspect, and their surroundings became more etherial; the pale luminous green yonder at the horizon began to deepen and to melt imperceptibly to a shadowy blue; the stars twinkled out, and presently a great full moon rode triumphantly over their heads. Silence had reigned for a little time between the lovers, but Rachel suddenly broke it:—

"To-morrow, Simon, to-morrow, we shall be speeding along this same road—man and wife!"

CHAPTER XXV.

But let this day, let this one day be mine;
Let all the rest be thine.

—SPENCER.

SIMON often looked back upon that journey with a feeling that it had only taken place in a dream. It was true the sweet presence at his side had at the time seemed tangible enough, and the need for prompt and decisive action very real; but, later on, when he called to mind how they clattered into sleeping towns that night, with what difficulty they aroused the drowsy ostlers and surly turnpike keepers, how, though the scene changed constantly and they advanced ever farther and farther, it seemed to their impatience as though they would never reach their journey's end, but would go galloping on and on interminably. Then—ah, how often Simon recalled it afterwards—they became conscious of a change in the aspect of the country; the black shadowy forms of tree and hedgerow began to assume more definite shape, and through the universal greyness came faint gleams of colour. The chaise-lamps burned dim, the stars overhead grew pale, and all at once shafts of light seemed to transpierce the heavens, and they found themselves speeding onwards through the glory of the dawn. Rachel's face looked pale as the light fell on it, and she shivered; but when Simon bent over her, drawing the folds of the cloak more closely round her, she smiled. Very soon afterwards they realised with a great shock of joyful surprise

that the goal was actually attained. The postboy, turning round in the saddle, announced they were nearing the border, and with a grin pointed out the famous bridge.

"Simon," said Rachel suddenly, "we have forgotten the ring. I must have you put a ring on my finger—but where to find one now!"

"Why, perhaps mine would do," said Simon, drawing one from his finger. "You see it is quite plain, and indeed almost like a wedding-ring. My mother, poor soul, would insist on giving me a ring on my twenty-first birthday, and I had hard work to persuade her to choose a simple one. I have worn it ever since. 'Tis a world too big, sweet, for your little finger, but it will serve the purpose now. Next time," he added with a smile, "you shall have one more suited to you."

"Nay," said Rachel, "I love this ring because it is yours. You shall have it cut down for me. Why, what a big hand you must have, to be sure, Simon! We must tie this on by-and-bye."

And by-and-bye, sure enough, when the fateful words had been said, and they had breakfasted together, she drew a silken thread from the fringe of her sash, and, passing it through the ring, she made Simon knot it firmly round her finger.

"Now," she cried jubilantly, "now we are quite safe. Look at that, Husband Simon, and realise that the knot is tied, and can never be untied again. Do you understand, good man of mine? You could not get rid of me now if you were to try. It is done, and can never be undone."

"Blessed, blessed bond!" cried Simon, and he kissed, first the slender finger, and then the great unwieldy ring.

Soon, very soon, they set out on their homeward journey, for their great object was to return before the news

of their flight had spread. "All that we wanted," Rachel said, "was to make it impossible for any one to part us. We have done that now. Oh, Simon, I feel so strong and so safe. They may do their worst—it cannot hurt us—no one can come between us now."

This indeed was the burden of the thoughts of both all that long happy summer's day. Long it was, according to ordinary reckoning, but to these two it passed with unaccountable quickness. Seated side by side, in blissful security from interruption, free now to lay bare to each other secrets which even in the intimacy of betrothal had seemed too sacred to be revealed; free, moreover, to keep silence, with the certainty that their spirits still communed; conscious through all of absolute security, of entire union—union which it was now impossible to break. There again came in the joyous refrain—"It is done and can never be undone".

They pursued their way with such rapidity and made so few halts, that it was but five o'clock in the afternoon when they reached Preston, alighting at the inn where Simon had left his horse and gig on the previous night—a certain hostelry situated at the South-western end of the town, nearest to the road which led to Charnleigh. Here Simon proposed that Rachel should rest for half an hour and refresh herself with tea before they continued their journey. The young couple were shown into a cosy private room on the first floor, and were just preparing to sit down to their repast when a clatter of horse's hoofs was heard in the yard below, and the sound of a well-known voice reached them through the open window.

"It is Humphrey," cried Rachel, clapping her hands ecstatically. "He has come in pursuit of us. Shall I not call out to him quickly to prevent his making a disturbance here?"

Before Simon could reply she had sprung to the window, and, leaning out, called in her most demure and dulcet tones :—

"Pray, Cousin Humphrey, do you happen to be looking for me?"

Humphrey, who had just alighted from his horse, started violently, and looked up.

"Are you looking for me, Cousin Humphrey?" she repeated mildly.

"Most certainly I am," he replied in a voice that shook with suppressed rage. "Thank Heaven, I am in time! I thought you had been farther on your way by now."

"Why," said Rachel, "accidents will happen, you know. Horses will cast shoes, and even experienced drivers may take a wrong turn now and then. But it makes no difference in the end, Cousin, I assure you. We are just about to have tea; will you not come up and join us? But you must make haste, for it is late, and we wish to pursue our journey."

"Do you, indeed, madam?" returned he coming close under the window and looking up at her with a face that grew ever darker. "I fancy that what I have to tell you may cause you to alter your mind."

"Well, there you are wrong," retorted she blithely. "Come up, if you please, and say everything you fancy so long as you do not delay us unreasonably. But I warn you your pains will be lost on me."

Humphrey, without replying, began to make his way towards the inn door, and Rachel, turning from the window, advanced into the room, skipping and clapping her hands.

"This is vastly entertaining," cried she. "He flatters himself he is still in time. Now, for once, I will steal a march on this clever cousin of mine, and pay off a few

old scores besides. Quick, where is my glove? Not that one—the left—the left. Now, Simon, for your life do not say a word to make him think we are married. I promise myself some rare sport. I will draw him on and on—you'll see—and when I have played him long enough I will whip off my glove and show him the ring. Now, you blundering old straightforward fellow, keep quiet and leave him to me."

Many a time afterwards Simon conjured up the vision—the slender figure standing with its back to the window, bathed in the full glow of the afternoon sun, the mischievous face in which the dimples came and went, the laughing eyes bent expectantly on the door. Thus he saw her—his girl-wife—oh God, how often!

"Here he comes," she cried under her breath, as a rapid step was heard in the passage without; and a moment afterwards Humphrey entered.

CHAPTER XXVI.

And he said likewise,
That a lie which is half a truth is ever the blackest of lies,
That a lie which is all a lie may be met and fought with outright,
But a lie which is part a truth is a harder matter to fight.
—TENNYSON.

CHARNOCK threw one scornful glance at Simon, and then turned his attention to his cousin, greeting her unceremoniously.

"You may thank your stars, Miss Rachel, for those lucky accidents which delayed you until now. It was close upon noon when I arrived at Charnleigh, and my poor uncle, who was nearly out of his mind with grief and anger, had not long discovered your flight. He had thought you sulking in your room—even when he ascertained that you were nowhere about the premises the possibility of your elopement did not occur to him. Not, indeed, until on making inquiries he found that your lover was also absent. Ah, you laid your plans very cleverly, but you are not quite so clever as you supposed, you see."

"So it appears, indeed," she returned. "I had no idea you would come up with us here, but really, my dear Cousin, I am sorry you should have given yourself so much trouble; you must have been tired after your long journey, and it was a little inconsiderate of my father to send you forth again on such an unnecessary errand. If you think you can bully or cajole me into giving up Simon Fleetwood I can assure you very positively that you are mistaken.

Nothing that you can say will have the least effect on me."

"There, my good girl, you are making a mistake," retorted Charnock, who, though his face was livid with passion, had evidently schooled himself to speak with calmness. "It is quite impossible that what I have to tell you should not have a very great effect on you."

"This grows interesting: pray let us hear."

"When you suffered yourself to be persuaded to take this disastrous step," said Humphrey deliberately, "it is more than probable that you imagined you were trusting yourself to a man who, however beneath you in degree, was at least honourable and straightforward."

"Why, what remarkable penetration has this cousin of mine! As you say, Humphrey, it is quite probable that I did. Now, I wonder by what intuition you guessed the power of Mr. Fleetwood's persuasions." Here she darted a joyous, mischievous glance at Simon. "Is it not wonderful that he should have divined how you contrived the affair, how you besought me, how, in fact, you would take no denial? Clever Humphrey!"

"It requires no very great penetration, I think, to guess that such a plot was hatched by him," cried young Charnock, whose breath was now coming quickly, and who was evidently beginning to lose mastery over himself. "It was worthy of him—like the honourable man he is," with scornful emphasis on the word, "to take such advantage of your youth and inexperience. You were bound for Gretna Green, I suppose?"

"We were even bound for Gretna Green," responded Rachel still smiling.

"Truly the wedding would have been worthy of the husband! But no doubt Mr. Fleetwood wished to bind you to him before his true character should become known to you."

"It is quite likely," she returned lightly, "that he would have been desirous to bind me to him, and it is quite unlikely, my good Humphrey, that I should ever learn anything about his character which should make me love him the less. As to the elopement, I may as well tell you the truth about it. I myself ——"

"Hush, Rachel," interrupted Simon suddenly; "this is a matter which we will keep to ourselves. It is not necessary to take your cousin into our confidence."

She started, laughed a little shamefacedly, and looked down, blushing and silent.

The ready submission, the evidence of the yeoman's power over one whom he himself had found it impossible to dominate, destroyed the last remnant of Humphrey's self-control.

"You poor blind foolish puppet!" he cried bitterly; "it is time you knew how grossly you have been played with and deceived. Come, I will relate to you one or two little items which I'll wager that you have been ignorant of till now, well as you imagine you know this disinterested lover of yours. You trust him so completely, do you not? You are convinced that it would be impossible for him to betray your confidence? Pray ask your Pearl of Honour, then, how it was that he never mentioned to you a certain vile and discreditable contract to which he was a party. You remember Edward Gifford?"

"Really, Humphrey," said Rachel pettishly, "I wish you would not shout so loud, nor jump so rapidly from one subject to another. Of course, I remember Edward Gifford, but what has he to do with Simon except that he happens to be his cousin? Pray tell me first about this wonderful discovery of yours, this vile and discreditable contract as you call it. I have no doubt it can be easily disposed of." She threw back her little

head and glanced at Simon with proud confidence. He had been hitherto quite passive, but now came a step nearer to her, his face composed, his glance steady.

"I can better explain the business," said Humphrey, once more endeavouring to regain his composure, "if I first relate to you a little matter in which Edward Gifford was concerned. My uncle happened to be in very great straits for money at the time when Edward Gifford was paying court to you, and knowing that he was a rich man proposed to borrow from him a large sum—fifteen thousand pounds, I think. To this Gifford agreed on condition that your father promised to favour his suit."

"A nice compact, truly!" cried Rachel, with flaming cheeks. "So it was Gifford who made it? I am sorry, Simon, that you should be disgraced by such a cousin, but indeed I have no right to condemn him since my own father could stoop to such baseness."

"Wait a bit!" said Humphrey; "the plot thickens as it progresses. Your noble disinterested lover, Mr. Simon Fleetwood, gets wind of the affair; in some inexplicable way he drives Gifford from the field ——"

"Ah, my brave Simon," cried Rachel, with sparkling eyes, "that was like you! Though my own flesh and blood was faithless to me, you protected me." And as she spoke she stretched out her slender gloved hand, the hand whereon the wedding-ring lay snugly concealed, and passed it through his arm.

"Oh yes, he protected you," sneered Charnock; "you shall hear how he protected you. Good Farmer Fleetwood is a sound man of business, and it seemed to him that the bargain which he forced his cousin to drop might profitably be taken up by himself. Now be quiet, Rachel"—as she was about to break out impetuously—"let me finish my story, and then say what you like.

This would-be speculator comes to my uncle. 'You are in need,' says he; 'you don't know where to turn for fifteen thousand pounds.' 'I am at my wits' end,' says my uncle. 'I'll lend the money to you,' says your valiant, noble, high-minded lover, 'on the same terms as those agreed to by my cousin Gifford.'"

"Enough!" cried Rachel fiercely. "I will not listen to another word. 'Tis not in human nature to stand by and hear the man I love and honour calumniated thus. You do well, Simon, you do well to treat these abominable falsehoods with the scorn they deserve. Do not answer him—do not gratify him by even denying them."

"He knows very well that he cannot deny them," retorted Humphrey.

Simon laid his hand gently on the little hand which trembled on his arm, and looked Rachel full in the eyes: "Love," he said quietly, "I do not deny them. The way in which he has told his story is garbled, but the substance of it is true."

The hand within his grasp leaped as though stung by a reptile, and was quickly snatched away; when she spoke her voice was harsh, unnaturally loud, absolutely unlike itself.

"It is true that knowing my father's straits you offered him a sum of money for the right to become my suitor?"

"Yes," said Simon, "it is quite true."

There was a silence in the room for the space of a full minute, and during that minute Simon, whose eyes remained fixed on Rachel's face, till then so full of youthful softness and bloom, saw the lines tighten and harden till it became, as it were, a mask of itself—a dreadful rigid likeness of the face which had been so dear to him. Suddenly she flung up her arms and burst into a peal of loud discordant laughter.

"Truly, we live in a practical age," she said. "Last Monday se'ennight a man sold his wife by auction in Sheffield market-place. He called her a cow, and put her in the hands of a butcher with a halter round her waist. My father appeared much scandalised when he read me out the tale, but, in truth, I think that I and the cow stand in much the same position. She only fetched a guinea and a pot of beer, poor thing, but she was probably a common, worn-out animal, not good for much. I believe I may say I am thorough-bred, and, moreover, in my prime—I'm not surprised that fifteen thousand pounds was the first bid, but it was scarce fair to drive the purchaser away; 'twould have been better, Mr. Fleetwood, to have competed with him openly, and then in the ordinary course I should have been knocked down to the highest bidder."

She spoke pantingly, her voice being still quite unmanageable, her sentences coming in gusts and being broken every now and then by a shriek of that horrible, unnatural laughter; her hands were pressed tightly on her bosom, her teeth gleamed through her drawn lips—only her beautiful piteous eyes retained any semblance of their former selves.

Simon was thunderstruck at the sight of her frenzy. Having measured her love by his own, and imagined in his simplicity that her standpoint must necessarily be the same as his, it had never even occurred to him that the method he had employed in doing away with the barrier between them could be misjudged by her. Indeed, he had innocently looked forward to the day when he should be free to divulge it to her, to relate how the idea, first suggested by her own chance reference to her namesake Rachel, had gradually taken hold of him; how, when the compact was actually concluded, he had been proud to think that he was serving her father as Jacob had served Laban; how, at

the conclusion of each day, he had comforted himself with the thought that he was working for her—striving to earn the right to win her. He was now so overcome at the sudden revelation of the aspect which his conduct wore in her eyes that he was for the time incapable of speech. Even Humphrey was almost frightened at the mischief he had wrought. She turned to him presently with startling suddenness.

"You, too, Cousin Humphrey," she cried; "surely you would not be behindhand. You'll stand your chance with the others, will you not? A younger son's son is not worth much, it is true, but the heir to Charnleigh may do something. Come, you will make an offer—you must make an offer."

"I am indeed anxious to help you, Rachel," said Humphrey confusedly, "and it is for that very purpose I proposed to visit Charnleigh. My father and I are willing to cut off the entail on a portion of the property, so that it can be sold, and thus defray my uncle's liabilities."

"And somebody else's liabilities, too, eh?" said the girl; her lips were quite unsmiling, but her frame continued to shake with recurring spasms of laughter. "I know all about your debts, Humphrey, and feel sure that you have made good terms for yourself. Pray, is this other portion of marketable property, my father's daughter, to be thrown in with the rest?"

"Rachel," said her cousin with an injured air though with increased perturbation, "you do me injustice, indeed you do. If for your sake I agree to part with a large portion of my inheritance, it is but just that—that—some measure of compensation should be made me."

"For my sake?" interrupted Rachel; "what good will it do me?"

"It will do you this much good, that your father can pay off yonder scoundrel, that the bargain will be quashed, and that you in consequence will be free."

"Free!" exclaimed Rachel. "Good God—free!" She dropped into a chair, flinging herself forward across the table so that her face was hidden. Both men simultaneously started forward, but Simon, pushing the other on one side, reached the girl first, and threw his arms about her; but with a shriek she sprang up and released herself.

"Do not touch me!" she cried in a low voice, but with such an expression of loathing that his arms dropped, and he fell back without a word.

"Come, Rachel," said Humphrey now pressing forward, "you take this too much to heart; there is no harm done, after all. Send the fellow about his business, and let me conduct you home."

"Home!" she replied slowly. "I have no home; do you suppose I will ever cross my father's threshhold again? I might go to my mother, perhaps, but she is miles away. My mother—did she know of this? Do not tell me that she knew."

Humphrey did not answer, being, as it happened, ignorant of the matter in question; but Simon's deep voice struck in:

"Yes, Rachel, your mother knew."

"Then indeed I have no home," she cried; "it little signifies what becomes of me. Go, go, both of you, and leave me to myself."

"Rachel," said Simon, "I am not to be dismissed thus. I have a right to demand a hearing—I have a right, too, to demand that this matter should be discussed between us two alone. Desire your cousin to leave us."

She was about to make some indignant rejoinder when

a sudden thought appeared to strike her, and she turned hastily towards Humphrey.

"Yes, yes, leave us, Cousin. I, too, have something to say to Mr. Fleetwood which must be said in private. Do not be afraid; it will not take me long."

Seeing that he still hesitated she waved her hand petulantly.

"Go, I say, go. Heavens, how slow you are! Why do you delay?"

"Because I do not like to leave you in such keeping," responded Humphrey bluntly. "I have seen the strength of the fellow's influence over you. Goodness knows what he will make you believe—what rashness he may not persuade you to consent to."

"You may set your fears at rest, Humphrey Charnock," said Rachel deliberately. "Mr. Fleetwood's influence over me exists no longer. Come, that you may realise the fact, and since I suppose I must go somewhere, I give you leave to proceed now to the coach office and to engage a place for me in to-night's coach for London. I presume my aunt will take me in—she at least has never deceived me."

"Not to-night!" cried Simon involuntarily; "you are not fit to travel farther to-night. Take at least some hours' repose."

"She turned upon him with a stony glance, resenting his audacity in still venturing to take thought for her, and after a moment's pause she again announced her intention of travelling by that night's coach.

"The coach!" ejaculated Humphrey, "you would not travel by the common coach? No, dear Cousin, let us have a post-chaise. I will escort you."

"A post-chaise," repeated Rachel; and then she laughed again and clasped her head with both hands. "Nay, no post-chaises for me." She shuddered. "Book

me, if you please, for an inside seat; but do you, if you must needs travel with me, take a place outside. I am not in the mood for your company to-night. Now go, go," she repeated with frenzied impatience; "if you delay any longer, I vow I will refuse your escort altogether."

Humphrey, much chagrined, withdrew, and when the door closed behind him Rachel turned to Simon.

"I will not delay you long," she said quickly, "but I have something here which I must return to you."

She tore off her glove as she spoke, and began to pluck fiercely at the ill-fitting but firmly secured wedding-ring.

"My God!" broke out Simon, "I am punished—I might have known there could have been no blessing."

The cry burst from him almost without his knowledge, but Rachel heard, and it fanned the flame of her resentment.

"What, you would twit me now, I suppose? You would reproach me for my blind folly—my—my imbecile confidence. Oh, it is of a piece with the rest."

While she spoke she was still dragging at the ring, but the little silken thread, tightly knotted by Simon's fingers, held fast; with a yet more desperate wrench she at length succeeded in freeing herself, but not before the tightly-drawn thread had cut into the soft flesh, causing blood to flow.

"Oh, your hand," cried Simon impulsively, "your poor little hand!"

The involuntarily tender tone, so often welcomed, but now so abhorrent, caused her heart to swell nigh to bursting. She turned upon him like a little tigress.

"What is my hand to you? I would strike it off could I rid myself at the same time of its shame in having worn your pledge."

She held out the ring now, the blood dripping from her lacerated finger.

"Take it back, take it! Would that I could cast away with it the memory of this degrading farce of a marriage! Oh, I know that it was my doing. I put myself in your power, I unsexed myself—all through it is *I* who have taken the lead, thinking, poor dolt that I was! that your over-nice sense of honour, your excessive delicacy of feeling, held you back. It was I, I who urged, while you, forsooth, made pretence of hesitation. And all the time you were hugging yourself with the thought that you had bought me, that whether I would or no you had a right to claim me. Great Heavens! and this is the man of whom I prayed the Lord on my knees to make me worthy. I pray now, Simon Fleetwood, that I may never see your face again—your false traitor's face. You can keep secrets, I know, when it suits your purpose—keep this one for me. You have blasted my life: let that suffice you. Keep this shameful story to yourself. You owe at least this much to me."

"And do you owe me nothing?" returned Simon passionately. Like most men who are slow to anger his wrath was the more terrible when aroused, and Rachel, beside herself though she was, quailed before it for a moment. "Good God, Rachel! 'tis not a dozen hours since you swore to cleave to me till death should part us. If you think to have done with me thus you are mistaken."

"What, you would keep me by force, would you?" interrupted she. "You would make public my misery and disgrace, and call in the aid of the law, perhaps, to compel me to return to you? Let me tell you, I will die first."

"Nay, I would use no force—I would not even try to persuade you. If you come to me you must come of

your own accord. But you are my wife—while we both live we must be bound to each other. Oh, Rachel," and here his voice suddenly softened and broke, "is it possible you forget with what joy we told each other that the whole world could not part us now?"

"Do I forget?" returned Rachel, almost with a shriek. "No, I do not forget—oh, the mockery of it! I believed in you then, I believed your love so pure, so disinterested, so lofty—and all the while you were rejoicing over your bargain. Every smile, every loving word of mine, was to you so much interest on your outlay. When, poor fool that I was! I told you that I loved you for your honesty and your candour, that I knew you to be incapable of an untruthful word or a dishonourable thought, you were laughing in your sleeve at my simplicity."

She paused breathless, but continued after a moment:—

"However, I will not have you say I condemn you unheard; therefore, if you have any explanation to give, let me hear it. I am indeed curious to know what it can be."

There was a moment's silence—Simon, white to the very lips, returning her haughty gaze with one more steady, but as proud.

"Come!" she cried, with an impatient stamp of her foot, "let us hear this explanation."

"There is no explanation," said Simon. "If you can believe what you have said—if, after what has passed between us, you can think of me as you do, Rachel, I will give no explanation. It is indeed best for us to part now. Since it is your wish that I should keep our marriage secret, I consent to do so—for the present. But I will make no definite promise; when I think the time has come for me to speak, be assured that I will

speak. And now, farewell, my Wife, Rachel. Remember that you are my wife, and that you must henceforth be the guardian of my honour as well as of your own."

Her eyes, which had been fixed upon his face, followed him, as it were involuntarily, to the door, and watched till it closed behind him. He was half-way down the stairs when he heard it open again, and he paused, his heart leaping with a sudden almost sickening hope. He heard her footsteps in the passage, and leaning back against the wall, trembling and voiceless in his agony of expectation, saw her bending over the balusters; but the white pitiless face looked past him, and her voice called out with that new wavering harshness, inquiring of those below if the gentleman had returned from the coach office yet, and bidding them tell him that Miss Charnock was ready to start on her journey.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Ah! who shall hinder me to wail and weep,
To chide my fortune, and torment myself?
I'll join with black despair against my soul,
And to myself become an enemy.

. . . . . .

By a divine instinct men's minds mistrust
Ensuing danger.

—SHAKESPEARE.

IT was late at night when Simon reached home. Though on parting from Rachel he had at once left the inn, he remained in the town until she herself had quitted it. Standing unnoticed in the darkness he had seen the coach which bore her away from him flash past, and had caught a momentary glimpse of Humphrey's form on the box seat. Then he had slowly gone in search of his horse and gig, and set forth on his homeward journey. The horse, fresh from its long rest, would have pressed forward, but that Simon checked its speed: he would reach the Farm all too soon. Was this the same road which they had traversed yesterday; was he the same man? Every now and then he would glance over his shoulder at the empty place beside him, as though in search of the form which had occupied it yesterday; the tones of her voice sounded perpetually in his ears, the gentle loving words she had said recurring to him, each with an inconceivably bitter pang, the sharpest of all being caused by the memory of that jubilant phrase of hers:—

"To-morrow, Simon, to-morrow, we shall be speeding along this same road, man and wife."

The time had come, and they were man and wife indeed, but he was pursuing his road—alone.

Here was the wood where scarcely more than twenty-four hours ago he had, with such a fast-throbbing heart, caught sight of her expectant figure. Stung afresh by the recollection he whipped up the horse, and the animal springing forward, brought him in a few moments to his own gate. It took but a short time to unharness and feed the horse; and then, with lagging step, Simon made his way to the house. All was darkness there, and his heavy, unwilling knock had to be twice repeated before he could rouse the inmates. Then a window overhead was hastily pushed up, and Susan's voice tremulously demanded who was there.

"It is I," replied Simon. "The door is barred: come down quickly and let me in."

He heard a sound as of hurried clapping of hands within, and excited exclamations.

"La, it's them. . . . Who'd ha' thought they'd ha' coom so soon. . . . Bless me, Dolly, and not a thing ready. I told thee to hurry up, thou knows."

The window was thrown up a little further, and two nightcapped heads were thrust out into the night.

"Eh! theer's nobury wi' th' mester," Simon heard Susan whisper; and then Dolly's voice, "Hannot he brought her?" and he realised with an added pang of bitter humiliation that the story of the elopement had got abroad, and that his servants expected him to bring home his bride.

"Are you coming down?" he inquired sternly; "how long do you intend to keep me standing here?"

Then the heads were hurriedly withdrawn, and Susan announced that she would be down in half a minute—she nobbut needed to throw her petticoat over her head, and to find her shoon.

After a brief interval a travelling light could be seen behind the chinks of the shutters, and the heavy sound of slip-shod feet was heard on the oak stairs ; in another moment the bars were withdrawn, and the door thrown open, revealing the old woman's somewhat airily clad form and astonished face.

"Eh, Gaffer," she articulated, as he stepped past her, "wheer ever do yo' coom from this time o' neet, an' what han yo' done wi' th' lady?"

Simon turned sharply round. "Ask me no questions, Susan," he said.

"Coom, its easy talkin'," grumbled she ; "me that has knowed yo' since afore yo' was born, I may say. How's a body to ax no questions when the whole country side's agate o' talkin'? Why, they're sayin' yonder ——"

"Tell me nothing of what they say," interrupted Simon imperatively.

Susan, lifting up her candle, was about to expostulate with the freedom to which, she conceived, her length of service entitled her, when the sight of the haggard face which the light now revealed to her suddenly smote her. Going closer to her master, she laid her hand upon his sleeve.

"Summat's wrong, my lad?" she inquired tremulously.

Simon looked at her with troubled eyes but made no answer. At this moment Dolly, who had delayed to make a less perfunctory toilet than her senior, came tripping down the stairs, talking volubly the while.

"To think you should take us by surprise like that, sir, and find us so behind. Not but what I've got a few things ready—walls and floor is polished gradely, and curtains need but to be put up."

"Howd thy din!" cried Susan quickly, as Simon, taking the light from her hand, pushed past into the parlour, and closed the door behind him. "Theer's

summat amiss, as thou might see for thysel' if thou'd e'en i' thy yead. He's not brought nobry, and he dunnot want to be moidered wi' questions. Pop up to bed again, theer's a good lass—leave leet theer for me. I'll get him a bit o' supper."

Dolly, round-eyed and bewildered, paused on the lowest step. "Hannot theer been no weddin'?" she inquired under her breath.

"Hark at the lass! Of coorse theer's been no weddin'. Do yo' reckon our mester 'ud coom back wi' sich a face if theer'd been a weddin'? Get to bed, wilt thou? and dunnot go talkin' wi' folks o' this 'ere job. Best keep our tongues quiet."

Dolly slowly turned and reascended the stairs, her unfastened shoes going clipper-clopper at every step; and Susan taking up the light, hastened to the larder, returning presently to the parlour with a small tray. The room, seen thus at midnight by the uncertain light of the solitary "dip" candle, looked gloomy enough, and the master seated alone at the table, with his head resting on his hands, was the very picture of dejection. Susan deposited her tray beside him, and paused, hesitating.

"That will do," he said, without looking round; "I have everything I want now. Go to bed."

But Susan drew a step nearer, and put her gnarled old hand on his shoulder.

"Dunnot tak' on, Simon, lad," she said brokenly. "Eh, I have na' seen thee so undone since feyther and mother deed. Whatever's coom to thee? Cannot thou mak' shift to tell owd Susan as thought the world o' thee—ever since thou wast a little lad. Eh, and I do still. I'm getting past work, thou knows, but I allus said I'd stop and see thy first child christened. Didn't I now? Thou should na' mak' a stranger of poor owd Susan."

Simon raised his head, and taking hold of the hand

which rested on his shoulder pressed it warmly. "You're a faithful old soul," he said. "I am glad to think there is one creature in the world who loves me. Do not talk of being past work—there's many a year's work in you yet, old woman—you must stay with me until you die; but I fear me, Susan, you will never see the christening of any child of mine. Now go to bed, there's a good soul," he added, releasing her hand; "I want nothing more."

"Munnot I coom in a two-three minutes to clear away?" inquired Susan, much mystified and entirely overcome.

"No, no, it is too late; you can leave the tray here until to-morrow. Now, good-night, Susan, If you love me ask me no more questions."

The old woman withdrew very reluctantly, sniffing as she went, and wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, the usually available apron corner being absent on this occasion. In spite of her master's injunctions she stood for a little while outside the door, straining her ears in the vain hope of ascertaining whether or no he was plying his knife and fork. But all was silent within, and presently, with a deep sigh, she went slowly creaking up the stairs, sobbing under her breath.

Simon, indeed, had taken no heed of the inviting appearance of the little tray; his eyes were sufficiently open to his surroundings to note their desolation, but his mind and heart were occupied with other visions, with conflicting memories, some full of almost unbearable sweetness, some bitter and poignant.

The tones of Rachel's voice seemed to float about him, now arch, now tender, now sweetly penitent—anon stinging and fierce. Again he saw her standing by the hearth, as he had seen her on that first memorable evening, a phantom of delight in her

young grace and charm; and then as she had stood, such a few weeks ago, listening with downcast happy face when he talked to her of that memorable night—"*Were you thinking of me, Simon? Tell me what you thought of me.*" How the lovely colour had swept over her face, how the dimples had peeped in and out, how full of light had been the eyes raised at length to his in shy tenderness. Good God! and those were the same eyes which had gazed at him to-day, piteous, for all their fierce reproach, like those of a wounded animal.

He rose hastily, and began to pace about the room as though in an unconscious attempt to escape from the agony of his thoughts; but the wraith of his love paced beside him, and her voice sounded ever in his ears. "*Imagine if you please that I am already Mrs. Fleetwood. . . . You and I are staid old married folk. . . .*" Oh, the irony of the words—oh pitiless voice, so unendurable in its arch softness, the more unendurable because the jesting prophecy had now become realised. They were married folk, in truth, and Rachel bore his name; yet their wedding-day was the one which had sundered them for ever. "*Now we are quite safe,*" went on the mocking tones. "*The knot is tied, Husband Simon. It is done, and can never be undone.*" And then the voice changed again, "*Simon Fleetwood, may I never see your false traitor's face again. . . . What is my hand to you? I would strike it off could I rid myself at the same time of its shame in having worn your pledge.*"

Rachel had said that. Rachel! Suddenly—it seemed to him as though for the first time—he realised the overwhelming fact. It was she who had pronounced those terrible words which burned and stabbed anew with each fresh repetition. Great God, it was she! The room seemed all at once to swim, his heart to swell to suffocation. He could not breathe; he could scarce stand; but after sway-

ing a moment, staggered blindly to the door in the instinctive effort to obtain relief from this physical oppression. Susan had not bolted the outer door—that was well, for his trembling fingers could scarce have withdrawn the bars.

Now he was out in the cool night, with the great peaceful moon riding over his head, and the stars twinkling in their clear radiance—the self-same stars which he and she had looked at together yesterday. He could draw his breath now but only in great sobs, each of which shook his mighty frame; his steps bore him rapidly onward he scarcely knew whither, and his tumultuous thoughts outpaced his strides.

Thus through his own familiar fields wandered this desolate man. Now he was crossing the pasture where the young colts grazed, and at the sound of his heavy tread there was a rapid thud of hoofs, and a string of shadowy flying forms passed and vanished in the distance. On the other side of the hedge a slow regular munching was heard, and a dimly-defined horned head peered at him over the gate. As Simon let himself through there was a sudden stir among the cattle, a cessation of the placid cud chewing, as with clumsy haste the group moved out of his way. But he paid no heed to any of them, and walked straight ahead as though he had some definite object in view.

By-and-bye a dark mass of trees rose between him and the horizon, and he brought himself to a standstill abruptly, for there, close to him, almost at his feet, a gleaming expanse of water reflected the star-lit sky. That terribly alert memory of Simon's recalled to him now with a flash that here, here in truth was the spot where Rachel had first come into his life. It was while standing here that he had heard her childish voice calling to him from the other bank; it was here where, after he had carried her across, he had wrapped her in his coat and warmed

her little frozen hands in his bosom. Oh, little hands! Surely they had not only pressed against his breast, but grasped his very heart. Confiding baby hands which had suffered him to cherish them; loving, womanly hands which had caressed and clung to him; cruel, cruel hands which had flung him back the blood-stained wedding-ring. Oh, it was well to think of such things here, and now. Surely it was not chance which had led him to this spot to-night. Here, where the unconscious child had forged the first link of the chain which had bound the man's life to hers, here would he lay down that life, and make an end—an end of the pain, of the shame, of the intolerable memories. One step, one plunge—and all would be over.

But suddenly the stillness of the night was broken by a loud cry, and the cattle yonder raised startled heads. "No!" cried the voice; and Simon's tall swaying figure flung itself, not forwards into the still water, but backwards on the grassy bank, so that his miserable eyes gazed upwards into the serene vault of heaven. Thus he lay, he scarcely knew how long; but the temptation returned no more.

Yet when he rose at length, and began with stiffened limbs to drag himself homewards, he seemed still to feel the touch of the little icy hands upon his breast, and there were tears upon his face.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

He owes nine thousand; besides my former sum,
Which makes it five and twenty. Still in motion
Of raging water?

—SHAKESPEARE.

GREAT was the astonishment of the farm labourers when their master came among them at the customary hour, paler than his wont, indeed, and sterner looking, but otherwise appearing just as usual. Now these good fellows had, besides their natural amazement at Simon's sudden reappearance, weighty reasons---reasons which Simon himself knew not of—for being in a state of perplexity this beautiful morning. After some hesitation, Bill, the usual spokesman, took courage to lay the difficulty before the yeoman.

"The arter grass yon at the Hall, Gaffer—we'n cut it, yo' know; and yesterday we was agate o' turnin' it when the Squire sent word as we was to give ower."

"Well?" said Simon, in a dull, uninterested tone.

"Well, Gaffer," said Bill, with a puzzled laugh, staring hard the while with his keen little blue eyes, "we thought bad o' lettin' the good stuff go to waste; so I made bowd to say as we'd hurry up an' get job done soon's we could."

"Well?" said Simon again.

"Well, in a two-three minutes Squire coom to the field hissel', my word, he were in a stew! He dommed us all reet and left, and towd me as Yeoman Fleetwood mun gi'e no more orders on his ground. So we coom we're ways awhoam again; and the grass is layin' theer half

made, wi' nobry thinkin' o' turnin' it. Seems strange, dunnot it?"

His master turned away without replying, and Bill stood looking after him and scratching his head.

"Mun the stuff go to waste, then, Gaffer?" he called out after him.

"That is no affair of ours, Bill," said Simon; and he walked on with his head bent.

It troubled him to think that the fair lands which under his careful nurture had begun to prosper so well must be again abandoned to the reign of waste and desolation. He had taken an almost affectionate pride in coaxing the long-forsaken soil to make a goodly yield, and this harvest promised to be rich and abundant. He thought of those wide fields where the corn was already yellowing, of those others where long lines of roots were making so brave a show, of the great meadow already cropped once, and where now the aftermath lay in heavy swathes just as it had fallen from the scythe—it was he who had planned and sown and watched, and now he was forbidden to gather in the harvest. This was to be his fate through life: he should sow and never reap, the promise should be his but not the fruit, he should clasp the bride but not the wife. Endeavouring, however, to shake off these sorrowful thoughts, which, as he felt, unfitted him for the line of conduct he had lain down for himself, he fell to considering the practical aspect of the affair—some immediate step must be taken if the result of his toil was not to be entirely lost. After much pondering he resolved to consult Mr. Renshaw, and rode into Saltfield that very afternoon. The lawyer was just finishing his lunch, and started in amazement on hearing that Mr. Fleetwood was waiting for him in the office.

"Mr. Fleetwood, Sarah?" said he in astonishment. "I thought him miles away."

"It's him," said Sarah positively. "And he looks bad, too," she added as an afterthought.

Mr. Renshaw finished his glass of wine with a haste which, considering the quality of the liquor, was most astonishing; and betook himself immediately to the office. There, indeed, was Yeoman Fleetwood, standing unconsciously in the shadow of the curtain, his arms folded, his eyes bent upon the ground. His strongly-marked face looked more rugged than usual, haggard as it was and drawn. It was actually stamped with that pitiful semblance of age which a great shock, or a great sorrow, brings sometimes even to the very young.

The lawyer started back; then, as Simon, hearing him enter, looked up and removed his hat, he came forward exclaiming: "Good Lord, lad, I took you for your father—or rather your father's ghost. I protest if it were not for those brown locks of yours I should say this minute that you were his double. What have you been doing with yourself, Simon? What has made such an old man of you?"

"Have you heard nothing, then?" said Simon.

The query recalled Mr. Renshaw to himself. "I have heard too much," he said gravely. "I have heard so many tales, Simon Fleetwood, that I know not which to believe. 'Pon my word, lad, I find it hard to believe any of them," he added, softening suddenly; "but what a strange face is that of yours. Something must have happened, surely?"

The yeoman was silent, and his old friend, coming a little nearer to him, laid his withered hands upon his shoulders, and peered into his face.

"Come, it's never true that you carried off the Squire's daughter?"

"Yes," said Simon; "we went away together to be married."

"Oh, fie!" cried the lawyer. "Oh, tut, tut! Dear me! dear me! Why—why, what a monstrous thing—I couldn't have believed it of you."

He withdrew his hands from Simon's shoulders, shook his head, took a pinch of snuff, and then fell back a step or two.

"Pray, young man," he inquired with a sidelong glance, "did you marry the young lady, and, if so, what has become of her? Have you brought her home?"

"No, Mr. Renshaw," responded Simon sternly, "I have not brought her home. For the rest, you will hear it all, no doubt, in good time. Has not Mr. Charnock told you how matters stand?"

"I have not seen Mr. Charnock since yesterday afternoon," responded the other; "he was then in such a state of mind between wrath and grief that I was obliged to send Mr. Richmond to cup him. He told me some queer things, I must own, being ready to blab anything in his angry mood. Now I understand, Master Simon, your motive in making what I took to be such a one-sided treaty with the Squire. Faith, you fly high, young man, but apparently you do not fly far."

The lawyer paused to cackle drily at his own joke, and then continued:

"When you did take wing, I wonder you did not make more speed. The Squire, poor man, was too much undone to fly after you; but he informed me that, on his nephew's arrival, he at once despatched him in pursuit of you. Did he then come up with you?"

"Yes," said Simon, "and carried his cousin with him to London."

"And you let her go like that?" exclaimed the lawyer involuntarily. "Pooh! when you had gone so far you might as well have stuck to her. No, no, I don't mean that, of course. It was very well done of you, my young

friend, and I—I am rejoiced that you should have shown yourself so sensible and amenable."

He paused, took another pinch of snuff, and suddenly leaning forward and clapping his hands upon his knees, broke out again :—

"But what beats me is how the mischief you ever came to do such a thing at all—such inconceivable folly! And you, Simon, whom I thought a very rock of sense. What in the name of fortune made you forget yourself thus? You must have been mad!"

"Yes," agreed Simon, "I must have been mad. I suppose I was mad."

Mr. Renshaw slowly straightened himself, and cast another sidelong look at him. Simon's worn, dejected face and dull, lifeless voice touched him. "Well, since you repent, lad," he said, "we musn't be too hard on you. A man can't do more than own he was wrong, and wish the thing undone ——"

"I did not say that," interrupted the yeoman quickly. "I own I was wrong, but I cannot say I wish it undone. No," he added half to himself, "though I wish it had been done differently."

"Well, well," grumbled Mr. Renshaw irritably, "no need to split hairs. You'll be like to repent thoroughly before long, or I'm much mistaken. Good Lord, man, what brings you here? How have you the face to come back again as if nothing had happened, when the whole country's up in arms against you? Gad! I don't believe a single creature in the entire neighbourhood can find a good word to say for you. If you had succeeded 'twould have been bad enough in all conscience—folks would have wagged their tongues and shaken their heads over your audacity, but still it would have carried the day in the end. But as it is—to come walking back so tamely after having done nothing but cover yourself with

disgrace and ridicule! Simon, Simon, you should have lain by for a while—you should have kept out of the way. Bless me, if I can make you out—are you a simpleton, Simon Fleetwood, or the most impudent knave in the country?"

"Neither, I hope, sir," said Simon. There was a pause, during which the blood which had risen to his face ebbed slowly away again. "Whither should I go? My place is at home, sir, where I have work and duties. All that you say is very true, but I can take my punishment. I came here, however, to talk to you about another matter."

"Did you, indeed? You take things mighty coolly, it seems to me. However, sit down—sit down, and let's hear what you have to say."

"You must know," proceeded Simon, after they had seated themselves, "that it would be impossible for me to continue to manage the Charnleigh estate now; indeed Mr. Charnock very strongly objects ——"

"Objects!" interrupted Mr. Renshaw, "I should rather think he did object. He objects so strongly, young man, that he has already given me orders to raise twenty-six thousand pounds without delay on the property, that he may be quit of you."

"Twenty-six thousand pounds!" repeated Simon. "I only lent fifteen."

"There's the interest, my friend, don't forget that. It would not, truly, amount to very much; but the remainder, I believe, is to be handed over to that estimable young gentleman, Mr. Humphrey Charnock, who requires compensation for consenting to cut off the entail." Here Mr. Renshaw paused, sniffed, took his spectacles from his pocket, adjusted them firmly on his nose, and gazed through them severely at Simon.

"The long and the short of it is, young Fleetwood, that there is to be an end of the Charnocks of

Charnleigh. The Squire is an infant about money matters, a perfect infant. He imagines that twenty-six thousand pounds is to be had by the sale of a field or two. 'Renshaw,' says he, in his grandiloquent way, 'I must have twenty-six thousand pounds immediately —you must sell, therefore, as much of the property as will realise that sum.' Now you know as well as I do, Simon, that such a property as Charnleigh has really a kind of fictitious value, and that only to its possessor. If you come to cut it up and sell it ——" here he took snuff aggressively, finishing his argument with a shrug of the shoulders. After a pause, however, he continued :—

"Moreover, when such men as the Squire and young Mr. Humphrey begin to turn landed property into cash, there's no knowing where they will stop. I don't wish to reproach you, Fleetwood, but I think it my duty to point out the fact to you in case you feel inclined to run away with any more young ladies—this escapade of yours means ruin to the Charnocks, and the destruction of their fine old estate. 'Tis a pity, upon my word, that you didn't succeed in marrying Miss Rachel, for in these days penniless young women don't find it easy to get husbands. Her fortune was charged on the property, and if the property goes, where will the fortune be? But we're wasting time in discussing all this ; you had something to say to me, had you not? Let's hear it."

Simon, who had been pondering deeply, roused himself with a little start, and proceeded to lay before his old friend certain arrangements which he begged him to see carried out at the Charnleigh Home Farm in order to avoid great loss. Then, after hesitating for a moment, he fixed his eyes earnestly on Mr. Renshaw, and continued :—

"There is another matter even more important. Have you any purchaser in view for the Charnleigh property?"

"Pooh, lad! you talk as foolishly as the Squire. Do you suppose a purchaser with twenty-six thousand pounds in his pocket is to be picked up at a moment's notice? Purchaser indeed! I am in no hurry to find him — some Liverpool counter-jumper, I suppose. There'll be pretty times for us all when we have a fellow of that kind lording it over us. Nay, nay; give me the old stock—with all the Squire's faults I shall be sorry when he is no longer master."

"Mr. Renshaw," said Simon very seriously, "do you know what you must do? You must buy the property yourself."

"Well, upon my word, you're a cool hand," ejaculated the old lawyer, so much taken aback that he forgot to be angry. "I think you've lost your senses."

"Wait a bit; you will understand in a minute. You will lose nothing by the venture, for you shall be paid back immediately."

"Eh?" cried the lawyer, throwing himself back in his chair. "'Pon my life, Simon, I cannot be a party to such a piece of foolery. No, positively I refuse; gad, the Squire would never forgive me if he found out how he'd been humbugged. What, man, you propose to pay yourself with your own money, and throw away ten thousands pounds over and above, as a sop in the pan for Master Humphrey to play ducks and drakes with?"

The little old man's blue eyes appeared ready to jump out of his head with excitement; his wits seemed nearly as much muddled as his metaphors.

Simon winced, and drew a long breath.

"I had forgotten him," he said in a low voice.

"The young man has not forgotten himself, though. Besides his attachment to his cousin, which I believe he avowed openly to the Squire yesterday—yes, indeed, Simon, there's more than you, aye, and that fine fellow

Gifford, who've had the notion that by putting the father under an obligation they could secure his goodwill with regard to the daughter—well, to continue: besides this reason for cutting up his inheritance young Charnock is actuated by what I take to be a violent spite against you, and is willing to make great sacrifices in order to pay you off and be rid of you. Thirdly," continued the lawyer, sawing the air with his bony forefinger, "our young gentleman thinks this a favourable opportunity for satisfying his more pressing creditors. Were I to listen to you, Simon Fleetwood, the ten thousand pounds which you are so ready to fling away, and which have been amassed by the honourable toil of your honest forefathers, would be divided among tailors, and tavern-keepers, and ballet-dancers, and the surplus could be gambled away comfortably on the turf or at hazard. No, Simon, no," repeated Mr. Renshaw emphatically; "not if you were twenty times more love-sick than you are would I lift a finger to abet such folly."

Simon gazed at him as though only half comprehending his tirade; he had paid, indeed, little attention to the latter portion of it, but at its conclusion he repeated one of the earlier phrases with evident consternation. "He would make any sacrifice to be rid of me. He and his father and the Squire would even forfeit their patrimony to pay me off. Mr. Renshaw, I tell you they cannot pay me off, they cannot be rid of me. It is too late."

He rose from his chair and began to pace the room in increasing agitation. "Oh," he groaned, half to himself, "what a web encompasses me. Act as I will now, it seems as though I could not do right. What consequences from one false step—and God knows! I meant it for the best."

Mr. Renshaw crossed his legs, took snuff, sneezed, and said peevishly:—

"When you have done play-acting, Simon Fleetwood, I wish you would come back and tell me in plain English what you mean. What's all this to do about? What is it to you if the Squire and his brother and his nephew choose to make fools of themselves, and an end of their birthright? You haven't watched and nursed that property as some of us have. Sir, I tell you, at the same time that I studied Blackstone, and Coke, and all the rest of 'em, I studied Charnleigh. I sucked in Charnleigh, so to speak, with my mother's milk. I learned my legal alphabet on Charnleigh. Mortgages, indentures, leases, bonds—the Charnleigh property furnished me with samples of 'em all. And now, because you've been a fool, and the Squire's another, Charnleigh is to be scattered to the four winds of Heaven."

As before, Simon confined himself to the first part of Mr. Renshaw's speech.

"You ask me why this proposed sale of the Charnleigh property should affect me? It affects me because, little as I have cause to love Humphrey Charnock, I am an honest man, and I cannot in honour allow him to make a sacrifice which is absolutely useless. I tell you, Mr. Renshaw, it is too late. Can you keep a secret?"

"As an attorney of some fifty years' standing, young sir," returned the other drily, "it would be strange if I could not."

"Well then," said Simon, "the matter lies thus: the Charnocks imagine that by paying off with heavy loss to themselves the sum advanced by me to the Squire they can make an end of my claims to Rachel. They cannot do this now; even were I willing, the bond between us can never be broken. She is my wife. We were married at day-break yesterday morning at Gretna Green. It was on our return journey that Humphrey Charnock came up with us."

The old man nearly tumbled over, chair and all ; his face became purple, and he clutched at his neck-cloth. Simon, much alarmed, hastened towards him, but he waved him back with one hand ; by-and-bye, to the young man's astonishment and discomfiture, Mr. Renshaw fell a-chuckling.

"You dog!" he gasped, when he had recovered sufficient breath. "You sly dog! you artful blade! Gad, how you took us all in—you *very* nearly made a fool of me ; very nearly, but not quite, my boy, not quite. By George! I thought there was something up when you came home so quietly. I asked you, didn't I? why you didn't stick to your bride, but now I see your little game. What! Miss goes off so meek and mild and demure with Cousin Humphrey to London ; and you, my gentleman, come home looking as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth ; and you think you'll do a little bit of business while the Charnleigh property is in the market, and buy it in for Mrs. Fleetwood. 'Pon my life, I didn't give you credit for being so knowing—I didn't indeed. You have rather taken my breath away, I own, but from my soul I admire you."

Simon stared blankly at the old man for a moment or two, his jaw dropping, his face paler even than before.

"My God!" he said, "is that what you think of me?" He sank into his chair again, leaning his elbows on the table, and covering his face with his hands. The lawyer stopped laughing, and peered at him curiously through his spectacles. Simon, however, was too much overcome to be aware of the scrutiny. How was it that at every turn he was impeded by fresh complications, fresh entanglements? He had always striven to be unsuspicious and straightforward in his dealings with his fellow-men, and now he found himself misjudged and suspected by all the world. Here was his old friend—a

man who had known him from his very birth—ready to believe him capable of low cunning and trickery. But surely nothing need surprise him since Rachel herself—nay, he must not suffer himself to dwell upon that maddening thought. He must keep his mind clear, his faculties collected: the wrong unintentionally done must be repaired—that other impending wrong must, if possible, be averted. He dropped his hands and looked round, just as Mr. Renshaw was beginning to lose patience.

"You asked me just now whether I was a knave or a simpleton. Well, I am not a knave, though you apparently are ready to believe me one. I begin to think, Mr. Renshaw, that I have been a simpleton, for I imagined my actions would be judged by the motives which impelled them—I hoped, at any rate, that those who knew and loved me would, at least, consider me incapable of falsehood or dishonesty."

"Come, come, never pull such a long face," cried the lawyer a little confusedly. "Faith, 'all's fair in love and war,' they say, and I've always heard a little deceit was excusable where the fair sex was concerned."

"Mr. Renshaw," said Simon, "I am of necessity forced to tell you what I had hoped to keep to myself, at least for some time longer. My wife and I parted in anger—she has vowed to have nothing more to do with me. Her father had bound me to keep the compact between us secret, though he himself apparently had no scruple in speaking of it when it suited his purpose ——"

"What," said the lawyer, "the young lady knew nothing of it?"

"She knew nothing of it till yesterday, when her cousin told her, he being careful, as you may suppose, to place the worst construction on my conduct. She accused me of having deceived her, and—well—we parted."

"Pooh, pooh!" said Mr. Renshaw good-naturedly, "she'll cool down, my boy, she'll cool down. Let her alone for a bit, and she'll get over it. Never be downhearted for a trifle like that. Does the Squire know of this?"

"I should think, sir, that Humphrey Charnock would lose no time in acquainting him with it—with our parting, I mean, and of Rachel's wrath against me; but not of our marriage, for of that he is ignorant himself. We had intended to go straight to the Squire on our return, announce what had taken place, and thus force him to appoint an early date for the public and religious ceremony which we both wished for. We had meant to keep the Gretna Green expedition secret, and now she—Rachel—would have me keep it secret still. She besought it of me—she enjoined it on me. And I—I made no promises; yet, unless I am driven to it, I would not gainsay her in this."

His friend took snuff noisily, and instead of restoring the box to his pocket continued to hold it, tapping the lid reflectively with his forefinger.

"She thinks our marriage a shame and a disgrace to her," went on Simon, still absorbed with his painful reflections. "She will not bear my name—she swears that she will never see my face again. She would free herself if she could, but that as you know is impossible."

Mr. Renshaw took another pinch of snuff.

"Impossible? Humph! Well—yes—unless she were prepared for an amount of unpleasantness which I am sure her delicacy would shrink from. Under the circumstances the marriage might be broken, but not without publicity and scandal."

"In the meantime," pursued Simon, "the prospect of the sale of so large a portion of the Charnleigh property places me in a dilemma. I do not want my wife to

suffer further for the wrong which she deems I have done her; it was for that reason I wished to buy in the lands in question through you. I could thus have averted any pecuniary loss which might in consequence have accrued to her, and could still have kept silence according to her desire. But can I in honour allow this sale to take place on false pretences? I would defraud no man —least of all my enemy."

"Humph!" said the other, with a side-long glance at him, "I hope I am as honest as most men, but it seems to me that if I did steal a march on any one it would be a satisfaction to think he was an enemy. Do you propose to make an immediate avowal to the Squire, then, of this very informal union?"

"If needs be, I must."

"And what will the young lady say to that? Will she be the more likely to forgive you, think you?"

"No indeed," said Simon with a sigh.

Mr. Renshaw pocketed his snuff-box, and leaning forward took the yeoman by the hand.

"You're a good lad, Simon Fleetwood," said he, "a very good lad; aye, and an honest one too, but you're not a clever man of business, and upon my life I begin to think you're not a clever lover. What! you would choose the very moment when the Squire is in the mood to do desperate things to reveal to him that which would probably cause him to disinherit his daughter altogether, and to make an end of the property; and one, moreover, which would ruin your chance of reconciliation with that high-spirited young woman, all because of your quixotic notions as to the rights of that vicious jackanapes Humphrey Charnock. Now, look here, my good lad, go home and keep quiet—that's all you've got to do at present. Hold your tongue, keep up your spirits as well as you can, and leave the rest to me. I'll take care that

this sale is delayed long enough to give us all time to look about us. Meanwhile the Squire may content himself with blustering."

Simon, but half satisfied, was beginning to make some rejoinder, when the other cut him short:—

"Now listen to me, Yeoman Fleetwood, I'm not going to be bothered with you any more. You did right to come and see me, and the matter wears a very different complexion to what I supposed. Keep your mouth shut, my boy, and I'll keep my eyes open. I'll tell no secrets, I promise you, without your knowledge and consent. I shall be a long time in finding a purchaser for Charnleigh—of that you may be sure, though, mind you, I shall be very busy looking for one——"

"But——" interposed Simon.

"No 'buts,' young man. Come back," as the yeoman was beginning to move towards the door. "Understand one thing, Simon Fleetwood. Do not think a single penny of your money shall ever with my consent find its way into Humphrey Charnock's pocket. I'll be d——d if it does! Now you know, 'tis not my habit to swear" —and here Mr. Renshaw assumed a virtuous air, as though the fact of his swearing on this particular occasion was highly creditable to him—"but I say it emphatically, I'll be d——d!"

And thereupon Mr. Renshaw came out of his chair, and clapped Simon on the shoulder.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The sea of fortune doth not ever flow;
She draws her favours to the lowest ebb;
Her tides have equal times to come and go;
Her loom doth weave the fine and coarsest web;
No joy so great but runneth to an end,
No hap so hard but may in time amend.

—SOUTHWELL.

SIMON could not share the lawyer's hopeful mood; he could not see any prospect of the difficulties which surrounded him being removed, and, much as it would have cost him to gainsay Rachel's wish, it would almost have been a relief to him to have made an open avowal of the actual state of affairs. Turn which way he would, all seemed gloom. Whether he spoke, or whether he kept silent, his position was equally equivocal. He was not a man to trouble himself much as to what the world thought of him so long as his own conscience justified him; but now that he must own his responsibility for the misfortunes brought about—unwittingly, indeed—by his own act, misfortunes which not only affected him, but Rachel, he found himself painfully sensitive to the ridicule and censure of his neighbours. The abortive end to Farmer Fleetwood's daring expedition appeared to the rustic wags a fit theme for witticisms, neither very refined nor very good-natured; these, under other circumstances, he would have scorned to notice, but he writhed under them now—oh, how was his Holy of Holies profaned! All the world was free to make a mockery of its treasures, to trample them under foot.

These minor trials, however, faded into insignificance beside the anguish into which he was presently thrown by a letter from Madam Charnock. This had been scrawled hurriedly in the house of death, and heaped reproaches upon him which stung more sharply because of the evidently acute misery of the writer, who, already overwhelmed by sorrow, had so little expected this additional blow. She, too, accused Simon of breach of faith, of having taken advantage of Rachel's youth and inexperience, and brought irreparable disunion into a once happy family. Every word struck home, rankling alike for its truth and for its injustice; yet Simon's answer to the letter was characteristic in its reticence. 'I have deserved that you should reproach me, madam, I have brought my punishment upon myself, and I must bear it; but your suffering adds to its bitterness. I have no excuses to make, and I do not expect you to forgive me. For your goodness to me in the past I thank you. Your obedient servant, Simon Fleetwood."

About a fortnight after his interview with Mr. Renshaw, that worthy gentleman called upon him.

"The Squire has had a letter from Mr. Humphrey," he said. "That young gentleman seems to be changing his tune—I tell you, Simon, those quixotic scruples of yours were quite unnecessary—Mr. Humphrey seems inclined to revoke his recent generous proposal. Perhaps he has met an accommodating Jew broker, perhaps he has unexpectedly learned wisdom, and thinks that the bird in the bush—otherwise his rightful inheritance—is better than the bird in the hand—the thousand pounds which his creditors will immediately claim; and, perhaps—this hypothesis seems to me a very likely one—his pretty cousin's obdurate scorn, of which, mind you, he complains bitterly to the Squire, has stimulated a desire for revenge in that noble breast of his. At all events,

Fleetwood, my good fellow, Master Humphrey Charnock is off the bargain."

Here Mr. Renshaw got out of his chair, and, taking up his position on the hearth, turned his back to the fireless grate and absently drew aside his coat-tails, the better to enjoy an imaginary glow.

"What do you think of that, Simon?" he inquired after a pause.

"You say he is actuated by a desire for revenge?" said Simon.

"By a desire for revenge," repeated the lawyer, with an emphatic nod. "My reason for saying so is that the same post brings Mr. Charnock a letter from his daughter, couched in very unfilial and—really, you must excuse me—unbecoming language, Simon Fleetwood. In this she informs her father that he need make no more plans for the disposal of herself, that, were there no other man in the world, she could not be induced to accept of her Cousin Humphrey. All very well, you will say—it was wise and right of her to make an end at once of his pretensions. Quite so, but listen. She goes on to reproach her father in no measured terms for having made her, as she says, the subject of a bargain, and claims as due reparation that he should at once rid himself of his obligations towards his fellow-conspirator, whom I take to be yourself."

Simon's face twitched, but he made no answer. Mr. Renshaw pursued, after a moment:—

"I cannot describe to you the Squire's state of mind. On the one hand, that charming nephew of his revokes his offer, backed up, of course, by his papa, who had everything to lose and nothing to gain by the transaction, and who, no doubt, when he inquired into it, found himself let in for more than he anticipated; on the other hand, there is the young lady claiming reparation. You

have no reason to love the Squire, Simon ; but, upon my life, if you were to see him now you'd pity him."

Fleetwood was still silent, and Mr. Renshaw, suddenly discovering that the grate contained nothing more animated than shavings, dropped his coat-tails and returned to his chair.

"So there we are, you see. You can't be got rid of, my boy, as you yourself very truly said. The Squire talks big about paying you off out of his income, and meanwhile I am to be on the look-out for some one who will take up the mortgage. I say Yes, yes, to both, but, as you know very well, either solution of the difficulty is equally remote. Meanwhile your scrúples may be at rest. As to the young lady, I know more about wine than about women ; but it seems to me that this prodigious outcry betokens that she is not very happy in her mind. When a woman tells you she hates you, I've been given to understand that she really likes you more than is quite comfortable. She'll come round, she'll come round ; and, mind you, when you do get hold of her, I rather imagine, Yeoman Fleetwood, that you will find her a handful."

Simon smiled faintly and made no reply ; and presently his old friend went away again, wondering to himself what odd strain of ambition had mingled with the honest yeoman blood which had constrained both father and son to marry so much above their own degree, and led to such unsatisfactory results. Meanwhile Simon stood pondering, wounded afresh by this new token of Rachel's eagerness to make the rupture between them complete, and yet conscious of an odd satisfaction in the unlooked-for development of events. They could not be rid of him ; they could not, if they would, shake off his claims. He might not actively exercise his sway over the Charnleigh lands ; yet he was suzerain

of them. Rachel also denied his rights, and would fain have loosed his bond, but, nevertheless, she, too, was his. Oh, since the fates seemed bent on strengthening the links which bound them to each other, surely it was not that she might chafe for ever at the chain; surely some day it would draw her back to his embrace.

But, alas! as the days passed this consummation seemed more and more remote. Mrs. Charnock returned a few weeks after her mother's death, and one day astonished Simon by a visit. Her face looked very small and pale, and her figure fragile in its black garb, and Simon, though he had hitherto felt some natural resentment at the recollection of her reproaches, was conscious of an overwhelming pity as he looked at her.

"Simon," she said hurriedly, as he advanced to meet her, bowing, but making no effort to extend his hand, "Simon, I have come to beg your pardon, and to—to—condole with you. I have seen Rachel, and she has told me much."

No words came to the yeoman, but he gazed at her, trembling with a secret palpitating hope.

"Alas! I have no good news for you, my poor friend. She will not hear a word of excuse for you, though from me she would not conceal the truth. When I told her of my anger against you for having, as I thought, persuaded her to consent to this mad act, she bade me quickly blame where blame was due, and told me that it was *she* who had proposed and urged the flight. But, oh, Simon, she spoke coldly, and set her face like a flint."

Simon moistened his dry lips, but said nothing.

"I told her, then," went on Madam, "that you had taken all the odium on yourself. I would have shown

her your letter, but she tossed it back and said she had no mind to read it. And then, looking me full in the face, she told me that she had parted from you for ever and never wished to hear your name again. And looking at me still, she went on to say that she hated you the more because she must bear your yoke all the days of her life."

"Ah, she told you that," said Simon in a dull voice.

"She told me. She concealed nothing from me, though she bound me to keep secret from her father that which she calls her shame. She reproached me bitterly with having kept silence on the subject of your treaty with my husband, and vows that she will not return home. When I told her that her father had forbidden us to speak—forbidden you as well as me—she laughed bitterly, and said she doubted not that you were well pleased to keep silence. And then, Simon, because I pitied you, and could not endure the injustice, I related to her all the story from the beginning, not concealing my share in it. I tried to make her see how little you thought to wrong her in striving thus to earn the right to woo her. I told her how you had offered to work for her as Jacob did of old for his beloved; and she cried out with a scornful smile that indeed you were well fitted to play the part of Jacob, since no man understood better how to act a lie."

"Tell me no more," cried Simon, throwing out his hand suddenly.

"Nay, indeed; I should not speak to you of what must be so painful. It is painful to me, too, believe me. I did not understand—I could not guess—oh, how will it all end? Simon, Simon, she must come back to you. She is your wife, and it is wrong for her to have forsaken you. Besides, her position is so anomalous—so dangerous! She is leaving her aunt's house now, you must

know; my sister-in-law naturally resents Rachel's usage of her son. Of a truth, she flouts him, though I cannot agree with Mrs. Charnock when she says that Rachel led on Humphrey, and now plays him false. It were better to own the marriage, but yet I almost fear to cross Rachel in this mood. And then her father—his health is broken, and I dread a further shock for him. And the scandal of it all! Oh, Simon, had you but reasoned with her, held back—but I will not reproach you, we must just think what is to be done now."

"Nothing can be done," said he. "Do not try to persuade her, madam; if she comes back to me she must come of her own accord. She is leaving her aunt's house, you say. Whither, then, is she going?"

"She intends to sojourn at Tunbridge for awhile with a friend of hers—Lady Susan Harding. Later on they proceed to Brighton. I know nothing of this Lady Susan, save that she was a friend of the late Duchess of Devonshire, and the Prince of Wales, I believe, frequents her house. The company, indeed, which she receives belongs exclusively to his set. I dislike the project, Simon; but Rachel is headstrong—I fear her taking some desperate step, committing some irretrievable folly if I endeavour to coerce her. Would that I could watch over her myself—but, alas, my husband needs me."

"Madam, I like not to think of her thus cast adrift. It seemed natural to me to return here, but if it is my presence which makes her shun Charnleigh, I can go away."

He spoke impulsively, but Mrs. Charnock shook her head.

"My poor Simon, can you take away the memory of what has been, the scenes where my child was wont to be so happy, but which are odious to her now? She cannot bear the name of home—she will not forgive her

father. She imagines, my poor Rachel! that by surrounding herself with amusements she can drown the bitterness of her heart. Well, let us talk no more of it —as you say, nothing can be done. We must only be patient, Simon."

They parted then, and he saw the lady but seldom afterwards, for her visits to the Farm had perforce to be paid without her husband's knowledge. The tidings which she gave him at these rare intervals were sparse and unsatisfactory. Rachel wrote that she was enjoying herself vastly; now she had been to this assembly, now to that. The Prince of Wales had visited Tunbridge, and she had played the harp for him. He was certainly monstrous fond of music, and had told her the harp was the instrument he preferred for feminine use, insomuch as it afforded opportunities for displaying the beauties of the hand and arm. She had also met Mr. Brummel, who had been mightily attentive, the compliments which he had paid her having aroused furious jealousy in the breasts of the recognised belles of the place. He had vowed to make her the rage at Brighton during the ensuing winter, and she promised herself much entertainment from the fact, for it was well known that if he possessed the will he had certainly the power to fulfil such an engagement.

"All this does not sound very like our Rachel," said Madam, one day. "There is no mirth in her letters, for all the pleasure she feigns to extract from these gaieties."

Simon folded up the paper gloomily and returned it to her; its flippant tone jarred upon him. His heart was sore and heavy—could hers, then, throw off its load so easily?

Later on came news from Brighton of breakfasts at the Grove, a concert in the Pavilion grounds, races on the Downs, a ball at the Castle Inn, at which Rachel

had danced twice with the Prince, and twice with Mr. Brummel. The valse, she informed her mother, was a most delightful form of exercise, and she quite revoked all her former objections to it. She walked daily on the Steine, and was quite surrounded by beaux and dandies whenever she took the air. His Royal Highness not infrequently condescended to pace beside her for a turn or two; nothing, indeed, could exceed his affability. Lady Susan gave card-parties of an evening, but Rachel had not yet joined, for it seemed to her that a monstrous deal of money was won and lost by the players, male and female, and the condition of her purse forbade this hazardous amusement. The letters arrived with tolerable frequency at first, but after she had been some time at Brighton there was a long silence. Mrs. Charnock lamented over it to Simon when she met him.

"I cannot but feel anxious," she sighed; and he, poor fellow, could say little to comfort her, for, in truth, he was anxious too.

One morning, to his surprise, she came out to him in the field where he was superintending the operations of his men. She called to him, and when they had drawn apart from the others told him tremulously that she had that morning received a communication which disturbed her.

"You have heard from Rachel?" he cried quickly.

"Nay. This concerns her, I fancy, but it has been sent to me anonymously. The cover is directed in a strange hand, but I believe it proceeds from Humphrey. Read this, Simon. I blush to show it to you—I would not do so, but that I have no one with whom to take counsel."

Simon received the document from her shaking hand; it proved to be a printed paper containing some satirical verses such as were then much in vogue. They were

headed "A New Star," and spoke of a recent discovery made at Brighton by "England's Hope and Glory," whose studies in astronomy were already of so varied and remarkable a character. It was not enough for him to single out luminaries whose radiance had long—over long, perhaps—dazzled the world, or to draw attention to those astral bodies which were chiefly remarkable for their *size*—his own *greatness* doubtless accounting for this preference. He had now actually found a *New Star*, the beauty of which was fresh to all beholders. After making merry for some time on the subject of *Falling Stars*, the writer ended with the hope that the Royal Enthusiast, who had hitherto studied astronomy chiefly by *fits* (*F—z*), though of late he had seemed to have more *heart for't* (*H—d*), would now make no *miss-take*.

The simple yeoman read the paper through, and looked at Mrs. Charnock in utter bewilderment.

"It seems to me great nonsense," he said bluntly; "scurrilous nonsense, I have no doubt, but I do not understand a word of it."

"What!" cried Madam impatiently, "surely the meaning is plain enough. England's hope and glory is, of course, the Prince—do they not speak of him here as the Royal Enthusiast? See, they allude to Mrs. Fitzherbert and Lady Hertford—the Prince of Wales, you know, is intimate with both these ladies—in fact, it is commonly said that Mrs. Fitzherbert is his true wife, as his marriage to her took place some years before that with Princess Caroline. And all this talk about a new star, a star with fresh beauty, a *miss*-take. Simon, Simon, my mind misgives me—why should this paper have been sent to me?"

"Madam," cried Simon hotly, "I see that you fancy these insinuations are directed against your daughter. Good Heavens! do not you, at least, know her better?

She is as pure as she is proud, God bless her, and God forgive her!"

"But why—why should the paper have been sent to me?" repeated the poor mother almost with a wail.

"It may well, as you say, have been despatched by your nephew. Heaven pardon me if I wrong him, but I believe him to be capable of any malevolence. As for the Prince of Wales, his follies are notorious—his attentions, they tell me, are divided among many. Alas! I fear that the discovery of new stars is common enough to him—but Rachel is too high-minded to suffer him to take liberties with her."

"Simon, you almost make me ashamed of my mistrust; and yet I cannot help being anxious. Why does she not write to me?"

"In truth, I cannot say, madam. Not, I feel sure, because she has anything to conceal. Her letters spoke openly of his Royal Highness' attentions. Oh," he cried passionately, "it is inconceivable to me that you can doubt her!"

The lady was silent for a moment, looking fixedly at him; then she said with a deep sigh:—

"I hope you are right, Simon—indeed, you must be right. Surely I should be satisfied if you are."

"Satisfied!" he repeated with a groan; continuing after a pause in an altered tone—"I believe her to be incapable of compromising herself if that is what you mean."

"You are a good man," said the mother, speaking, however, sorrowfully; "no one will ever love my poor child as you do."

It was about a week later that Simon received a letter in a hand that was unknown to him, a delicate, flowing hand, evidently that of a woman. On opening it he discovered that it was headed "Brightelmstone," and was from no other person than gentle Bertha Gifford.

"You will be surprised to hear from me, my dear Cousin," it began, "but I have no one with whom to take counsel on a very delicate matter, and so bethought me of turning to you. You remember the great kindness I have received from the Charnock family, and the friendship which exists between me and Rachel. She is, as you are perhaps aware, staying in this place; and I am at the present moment sorely preplexed and disturbed about her. Though she is as affectionate to me as ever, I find her in many respects changed. She is restless and flighty, perpetually craving for excitement, and—what gives me most anxiety—seems quite heedless of the remarks to which she exposes herself. I could not bring myself to write these things, Cousin, were it not for my attachment to the dear girl, and my conviction that you will respect my confidence, and advise me wisely. I remember your esteem for the Charnock family, and I know that you are as anxious as myself to uphold the honour of their name. There is much gossip current here—foolish and spiteful, no doubt, but I fear me that Rachel's heedlessness affords some grounds for it. The Prince of Wales is frequently in her company, and she is surrounded by a number of people who abet and encourage any folly she chooses to indulge in. By all accounts this Lady Susan Harding, with whom she is staying, is a most unfit person to have charge of her; the company which frequents her house is, I feel sure, not such as her mother would approve of. Tell me honestly if you would advise me to warn Mrs. Charnock of the condition of affairs, so that she may remove her daughter before serious mischief occurs."

Strong man as he was, Simon turned sick and faint as he read this letter. He sank into the nearest chair, the paper fluttering in his hand. After a time he rose, and mounted the stairs, walking heavily, and stumbling

as he went. His step sounded so unlike his ordinary one that Susan came hastily out of her kitchen to ascertain what was the matter. Receiving no answer to her repeated queries, she followed him to his room, and watched in surprise as he moved about, slowly, and with a dull vacant face, looking as though walking in his sleep.

"What are you sortin' out your clothes for, Simon?" she inquired presently. "Are you going away?"

"Yes, I am going away. Fetch me my bag, there's a good soul."

"Eh, dear," murmured Susan, "I doubt theer's summat amiss!"

"Yes, Susan, there is something amiss."

"Yon letter—it brought thee bad news?"

"Very bad news."

"Eh, lad, ye give me a turn when ye look at me that gate. Hoo's not dead, Simon?"

"No, not dead, thank God," broke from Simon involuntarily; and then he suddenly seized the old woman by both hands. "Oh, Susan, Susan, perhaps I should not say Thank God."

CHAPTER XXX.

For she had eyes and chose me : no, Iago,
I'll see, before I doubt, when I doubt, prove.
. . . . . .
Her name that was as fresh
As Dian's visage is now begrim'd and black.
—SHAKESPEARE.

THAT very morning the yeoman set forth, posting first to London, and reaching Brighton on the evening of the following day. He was then travelling by coach, and though the distance from the capital to Brighton was short in comparison with that traversed the day before, the halts were so frequent and the delays so tedious that it took nearly a dozen hours to cover the fifty miles between Blossom's Inn, whence the coach started, and his destination.

Oh, what a weary journey was that, and how Simon fretted and fumed over the stoppages. The morning was raw and chilly, and the other outside passengers sipped appreciatively at the elderberry wine which was served to them, steaming, at the Tangier, Banstead Downs. Then the interminable lunch at Reigate, where some of the travellers, bitten with an irritating desire for knowledge, insisted on inspecting the Baron's Cave; succeeded all too soon by a halt of two hours for dinner at Staplefield Common. Other delays occurred at Hancross and Patcham, and the journey was further impeded by the necessity of walking up the hills, the coach proceeding at a snail's pace, and the passengers being called on ever and anon to assist its progress by pushing at the wheels.

At last, at last Brighton! And now Simon's feverish impatience gave way to a sense of profound depression. He had reached the goal indeed, he was near enough to his wife to protect her in case of need; yet how could he obtain access to her since he was even ignorant of her address. This, however, he could soon put himself in possession of; and so having removed the dust and stain of travel, he sallied out, late as it was, and after some inquiries, was directed to Lady Susan Harding's house.

He paused on the opposite side of the road, looking up at it a moment or two before he could come to any definite conclusion with regard to his next act. It was a small house enough, but light streamed through every chink of the shuttered windows, and a couple of lackeys stood gossipping on the steps. Was Rachel within? Which of the shuttered windows belonged to the room which sheltered her? His heart began to beat tumultuously at the very idea of her proximity; but after a moment he made up his mind as to the course he intended to pursue, and, stepping across the road, accosted one of the servants.

"This is Lady Susan Harding's house, I believe?"

The man, who had been laughing loudly over some jest which he was retailing to his companion, broke off a moment to stare at the new comer, and then continued his anecdote without further noticing him.

"By —— 'twas as good as the play itself to hear 'em. 'You little devil,' says the old cat, 'you are getting out of my hands, confound you.' 'Your ladyship,' says she, 'twas yourself taught me to fly high ——' 'Ye'll fly a bit too high, miss,' says Sukey. 'Up like a rocket and down like the stick.'"

"D—— me, so she will," cried the other man. "Our folks say she's done for already. Ha! ha! well, 'tis the first time he shows taste to my thinking. A grand-

mother, ha! ha! or a great fat mattress of a woman—' that's the kind of d——d favourite he generally takes to."

"Pray," interrupted Simon impatiently, "will you answer my question? Does Lady Susan Harding live here?"

"Lord, don't be in such a hurry—you're a stranger to Brighton or you'd know. 'Tis too bad if a gentleman cannot have a moment's conversation with a friend without being interrupted so unmannerly."

"Ay," chimed in his comrade, "'tis so wulgar to interrupt. Mr. Brummel never takes no notice of interruptions. He was visiting at our place the other night, and the Prince himself, who was there *incog.*, cut in while he was telling a story, and Mr. Brummel, he justs talks him down. 'Did you hear me speak, George?' says his 'ighness after a bit, and Mr. Brummel says ——"

But what Mr. Brummel said was not destined to transpire, for here Simon's patience came to an end.

"Answer my question," he said sternly, "or I shall make you regret your insolence."

His hitherto quiet aspect and plain dress had led the fellow to suppose him to be a person of so little consequence that he could be slighted with impunity; the yeoman's authoritative manner now caused him to think himself mistaken, and he answered quickly and respectfully.

"Yes, sir, this is her ladyship's house; but she is not at home at present. She has gone to the play, and will not be back till late."

"Miss Charnock is staying here, I believe," pursued Simon, in tones harsh with suppressed emotion. "Does she happen to be in?"

Before answering, the man glanced with dismay at his companion.

"Miss Charnock has gone to the theatre with her ladyship, sir. Who may I have the honour to say called, sir?"

"I thank you," returned Simon; "I will not leave my name: I shall come again to-morrow, probably."

Before he turned away he saw the two men grin meaningly at each other, and as he crossed the road he fancied he heard the words 'There goes another d——d fool'.

He walked away more slowly than was his wont, for the same feeling of oppression and nausea came upon him which had overtaken him on the perusal of Bertha's letter. The talk of the two men had at first merely disgusted him, but now seemed to convey a terrible meaning: it was irresistibly borne in upon him that they alluded to Rachel. Indeed, even if their words, as they recurred to him, had not of themselves pointed to her, their meaning looks, their evident consternation on discovering his acquaintance with the young lady, their insulting pity would have made it clear to him. Good Heavens! was his wife spoken of thus, was her name not only bandied about by gossips of her own rank, but even in the mouths of servants?

By-and-bye he made his way to the theatre, feeling that he must see Rachel ere he slept that night. One glance at her face would tell more to him, who knew its every shade and variation of expression, than all these abominable inuendoes. They disturbed him, but not for one moment did he believe that there was any real foundation for them. She was wayward, he knew, and of late, it seemed, had grown heedless of the opinion of the world. He would judge for himself to-night whether this new-found recklessness proceeded in truth from a growing love of pleasure, or from her secret pain.

Though the performance was half over he was able to procure a seat; purposely choosing a cheap one at the back

of the gallery. The lights, the colours, the sea of faces, the brilliant display of jewels, all dazzled him for a few moments; but by-and-bye his eyes grew accustomed to the place and travelled systematically from box to box. Women were there in plenty; richly dressed dowagers, beautiful girls, young and fresh and innocent-looking, though they laughed consumedly at a piece which was neither very moral nor very refined; other women, beautiful too, who laughed still more appreciatively, and who did not even look innocent. Simon scanned them all, but it was almost with relief that he realised that she of whom he was in search was nowhere visible.

Having looked in vain for the face he longed and yet dreaded to see, he began to take note of the theatre itself, and particularly of one large box more handsomely decorated than the others, the blue panels of which sparkled with stars and were festooned with roses. A curtain of crimson velvet prevented Simon from obtaining a good view of its occupants, but he observed that three or four gentlemen and ladies were seated at the front of the box. One handsome woman, no longer in her first youth, with a sweet and somewhat melancholy face, was leaning back in her chair, and seemed to be speaking to no one; now and then her eyes rested attentively on the portly man who sat in the centre, but who did not once address her, and who indeed bestowed on her no manner of notice. This personage was handsome in a certain florid way; his full, rather sensual face being set off by glossy brown whiskers and brown curly hair.

On his right sat a lady, very elaborately dressed and covered with a profusion of jewels, who laughed and talked incessantly; though the important-looking personage, whose attention she seemed most anxious to engage, appeared to address his conversation chiefly to somebody, on the other side of him, concealed from Simon's

view by the curtain aforesaid. The yeoman was gazing at him absently, marking his smiles and grimaces, and idly thinking how odd it was to watch speech which could not be heard, when all at once a little ungloved hand was stretched out from behind the velvet folds and suffered to hang for a moment or two over the side of the box. Why was it that Simon was suddenly filled with a burning curiosity to identify the owner of that hand? He looked more attentively now at the fine people and their fine box, and presently leaned forward, touching the shoulder of the man who sat in front of him.

"Will you be kind enough to tell me, sir, the name of the gentleman who sits yonder, he who wears that broad ribbon across his chest?"

The fellow turned round, staring and laughing:—

"That, sir? That's the Prince of Wales."

"I thought so," said Simon. "And who may the lady be who sits on his right?"

"That, sir, is Lady Susan Harding—one of our high-fliers here, and a mighty great friend of his Highness."

"The lady in the corner ——" Simon was beginning, when his voice and his courage alike failed him: could he brook to hear her again lightly spoken of?

"What? Yonder rather stout one with the diamonds? That is Mrs. Fitzherbert, sir, Mrs. Fitz, we call her here in Brighton—the Prince's lady—or one of 'em. Some folks say she's his wife. Well, whatever she may be, she is a good woman, uncommon kind to the poor. She's no flighty body like the rest of 'em. But she is a Papist, sir—that's the only fault I have to find with her. If she was a good Churchwoman I'd say his Highness would do well to stick to her, and get rid of the Princess. Why, sir, they say that yonder at Blackheath she behaves most scandalous."

Simon was in no mood to hear of the delinquencies of the Princess of Wales; so, thanking his informant for the civility he had shown him, he drew back, and fixed his eyes again on the curtain of the royal box. But she who sat behind it gave no further sign of life; and by-and-bye, shortly before the play ended, Simon made his way into the air again, taking up his position near the box entrance. Standing back a little from the Grecian portico, so that the light from the lamps should not fall across his face, he watched eagerly for the appearance of Rachel.

Presently there came a tramping of feet, a rustling of skirts, a hum of voices; and the company began to pour out. Coaches drove into the semi-circular space in front of the building, chairmen crowded towards the doorway, link-boys shrieked themselves hoarse.

All at once, with a start, Simon recognised Rachel's voice, and bending forward, saw her emerge into the portico, leaning on the arm of a young man with a particularly well-formed and graceful figure. Several other gentlemen pressed round her, one carrying her fan, another a glove, another officiously uplifting the trailing end of her scarf. Her head was turned away from Simon, so that he could see nothing of her face beneath the silken hood.

"I wonder, indeed," observed the gentleman on whose arm she leaned, "that a young lady so remarkable for delicacy and elegance as Miss Charnock can condescend to enter this clumsy, old-fashioned carriage of Lady Susan's, when the distance is short enough to be traversed with ease in a sedan."

"Why, you see, we are sleepy, Mr. Brummel, after our late hours last night; and we are also hungry. I vow I could eat no dinner for thinking of the play, and her ladyship was in so crabbed a temper that she ate

nothing. And now we are in haste to be home to our little ragoût."

"That is no explanation, my dear madam," returned Mr. Brummel, in his low-pitched, musical voice. "Properly trained chairmen could carry you home quite as quickly and easily as those great hulking horses yonder. Pray, Miss Charnock, why does not Lady Susan select cattle with a little more breeding about them?"

"It is possible that Lady Sukey goes so fast in other directions that she is obliged to slacken the pace somewhere," chimed in the elaborately dressed man who was holding Rachel's fan. "But come, Brummel, you are surely jesting. No two-legged beast, however well he may be trained, can get over the ground as quickly as a four-legged one. Come, I'll bet you a pony that your own fellows do not convey your chair to Lady Susan Harding's house before her vehicle reaches it."

"Done!" cried Brummel; "I will send for my chair immediately. There is Lady Susan descending the stairs now. She is too keen a lover of sport to be unwilling to wait a moment or two until we can put the matter to the test. I had meant to walk home to the Pavilion by the west entrance with Big Ben, but I fancy Benina sups with him to-night. She looks glum, and I have no mind to be one of the party."

At this moment the good-looking, much-bedizened woman, who had been pointed out to Simon as Lady Susan Harding, made her appearance, and the little party gathered round her.

"You'll allow me, your ladyship," drawled the gentleman before alluded to, "to put my pony to your coach? I assure you it will add to the reputation of your equipage."

"Thank you, Mr. Stanhope," returned Lady Susan

with a loud jolly laugh, "my coach can do without your pony; but if you like to add a monkey to our load, we shall be glad to welcome you to supper—perhaps you too, Mr. Brummel, would like to join our party. Come as many as like—I will feed you first and play with you afterwards."

"Pray, pray, my dear Lady Susan, have some pity on our pockets," cried Mr. Brummel; "mine is considerably the lighter for our long sitting at your house last night. But come, I see your ladyship is quite at a loss to know what we are driving at with these ponies of ours. You must know Lincoln, here, bets that my sedan, carried by my two strapping fellows, will not reach your house before your ladyship's carriage—both starting fair from the same point."

"And do you mean to say, Mr. Brummel, that you have so poor an opinion of my horses as to make such a wager?"

"Madam," said the beau, with superb effrontery, "were I to tell you my candid opinion of your charming self, and everything that belongs to you, you would most probably rebuke me for indiscretion. But here is my chair. Now, who will see fair? Tommy Onslow, you are a competent authority on all matters connected with pace, you will do it."

An odd-looking, stout little man, who had been standing somewhat apart from the others, chewing a toothpick which somehow seemed as if it ought to have been a straw—for even in evening dress Lord Cranley contrived to look horsey—nodded assent and stepped forward, signing to the chairmen to place themselves in line with the carriage. Mr. Stanhope assisted Lady Susan to enter the equipage, and Brummel was about to do the same for Rachel, when she suddenly expressed a desire to inspect the famous chair. She advanced so close to

the spot where her husband stood that by stretching out a hand he could have touched her. He had hitherto stood as though turned to stone, but as Rachel came forward he drew a long breath.

"Why, Mr. Brummel," she cried gaily, "what luxury, what extravagance! 'Tis all lined with white satin, I do declare! These cushions—how soft they are, and what a beautiful white rug! Positively since it is going to our house I have a mind to occupy it myself. 'Twill make no difference to your pony I'll dare swear, for I am a light weight."

"I shall be honoured—delighted," returned Brummel; "but how shall I reach Lady Susan's?"

"Why, you can take my place in the coach."

"What!" ejaculated he, "climb up all those steps, and sit in anguish when they are drawn up after me, fearing that any moment they may fall upon my feet and crush them? Miss Charnock, my nerves are shattered after our dissipation of last night—can you be so cruel as to condemn me to such a penance?"

"And can you be so ungallant as to refuse to gratify my whim? As for the steps, they have never fallen upon my feet, so I do not see why they should fall upon yours. Pray, Mr. Brummel, do you never enter a coach?"

"Never, if I can possibly help it. Our coachbuilders are terribly behind the age. Why cannot they invent steps that would fold up outside?"

"Why do not you set your mighty intellect to work and bring out the patent yourself?" retorted she. "But I am going in your sedan, Mr. Brummel: pray help me in."

In another moment she was seated among the white satin cushions, and amid a general outcry the chairmen prepared to start.

"Stop, stop!" cried the umpire. "It was understood that Brummel was to be carried in his own chair. He must be as heavy again as Miss Charnock."

"Rachel!" screamed Lady Susan, with her head out of the coach window, "come here instantly! I'll not stand this piece of buffoonery. What have you to do with Mr. Brummel's chair?"

"Why, I mean to sit in it, that's all!" said Rachel with a saucy nod and wave of the hand.

"Deuce take me if it's fair though!" cried Lincoln Stanhope.

"Stanhope, my boy, I am surprised at such unseemly agitation," remarked Brummel. "I beg to observe, Cranley, that till now there has been no stipulation made as to the person who is to occupy the chair. Surely, if Miss Charnock wishes it, she is entitled to do so."

"I do wish it," asserted Rachel, and, leaning forward, she smiled upon the by-standers with magical effect. There was another murmur, but this time of approval and applause.

"Come," cried Lady Susan impatiently, "I for one cannot stay here all night. If that obstinate little cat refuses to accompany me you had better come, Mr. Brummel, and you too, Tommy. At least I shall be able to keep my eye upon you and see that you do not bribe my coachman."

She had already recovered her good-humour, and her ringing laugh was heard as Lord Cranley climbed into the vehicle, followed by Mr. Brummel, who uttered a groan of disgust as the steps were drawn up after him. Cranley, removing his toothpick, leaned solemnly out of the window:—

"Are you ready, men?" he cried. "Get the chair into position, and start as soon as I whistle."

"Pray, Brown," screamed Lady Susan, "whip up your horses as soon as his lordship whistles. By-the-way, Stanhope, what are you going to do? Will you have a seat?"

"I thank you, no. I can trust your ladyship to see that your Jehu drives straight. I mean to run after Brummel's fellows and make sure they take no d——d short cuts."

The chairmen took up their burden, Lady Susan's fat old coachman poised his whip, the footman sprang up behind; and presently Lord Cranley, with his head still protruding from the window, gave utterance to a whistle that would have done honour to the prowess of a street boy. Off set the chair with its light occupant swaying from side to side, down came the whip on the horses' flanks, the heavy vehicle being, nevertheless, got under weigh with difficulty; Lincoln Stanhope's long swinging trot kept him abreast of the sedan, and a little crowd of dandies followed with as much speed as their tight-fitting pantaloons and evening shoes would allow of. Lady Susan screamed out of one window in objurgation of her coachman, whose utmost efforts failed to persuade the horses to proceed at more than a jog-trot pace, and "Tommy Onslow" still leaned out of the other window chewing meditatively at his imaginary straw.

Soon the lumbering vehicle disappeared round the corner, the sedan having swung out of sight some moments previously; the sound of the heavy hoofs and the pattering feet, the voices and laughter, died away in the distance, and Simon was left alone. He stood still, however, for some time longer: when Rachel had leaned forth to appeal to her admirers he had seen her smiling face, and the remembrance of it was like a dagger in his heart.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky,
Thou dost not bite so nigh
As benefits forgot:
Though thou the waters warp,
Thy sting is not so sharp
As friend remember'd not.

—SHAKESPEARE.

SIMON had not dared to call on Bertha Gifford on the preceding night: he feared to startle her by suddenly appearing at so late an hour; but as soon as he could with decency present himself on the following morning he made his way to the address given in her letter. The Giffords had taken a good-sized house overlooking the Pavilion Parade, and the door was opened by a servant in handsome livery. Mrs. Gifford was not at home, he said, mistaking Simon's inquiry, and Mr. Gifford had left Brighton some time before.

"I asked for Miss Gifford," said Simon quietly. "If she happens to be at home, I think she will receive me. Have the kindness to tell her that Simon Fleetwood wishes to speak with her."

The man withdrew and presently returned. Requesting the yeoman to follow he ushered him into a large drawing-room on the first floor, where Bertha stood awaiting him.

"Cousin Simon!" she cried as he entered. "I am glad to see you; but what brings you to Brighton? I did indeed expect a letter from you, but ——"

"Why," interrupted Simon, grasping her hand, "a

letter would have been of no use. I thought it better to come myself."

"But what good can you do, Cousin? Did Mrs. Charnock send you?"

"No, indeed. I did not mention the matter to her, fearing to cause her useless distress. I thought it best to come—I had to come; but now that I am here, I wonder with you what good I can do."

Bertha looked inquiringly into his white face; the eyes were sunken after a sleepless night, and there were lines about the mouth which she had never hitherto seen.

She drew a long breath. She had given up all her personal hopes long ago; but she had not been prepared for this.

"He loves Rachel—he loved her all the time," she said to herself. "It was Rachel!" She turned a shade paler, and her lips quivered almost imperceptibly.

"Since you are here, Simon," she said, and her voice, too, trembled, "you will surely be able to do something. Does—does Rachel know of your attachment to her?"

"Oh yes," he returned, almost with a groan, "she knows."

"And does she," pursued Bertha, still with that pathetic quiver in voice and lip, "does she too love you, Simon?"

"I fear she has ceased to love me now."

Bertha walked over to the fire-place, where in spite of the bright spring sunshine the piled-up logs crackled merrily; she stretched out her hands to the blaze, and shivered as though she were cold. Simon could not have seen her face even if he had tried: he stood where she had left him with his eyes fixed gloomily on the ground. In characteristic fashion he had failed to take note of Bertha's discomposure; and had he observed it would most probably have attributed it to any reason rather

than the true one. The disclosures made long ago by Rachel, which at the time had caused him such disquietude, had now faded completely from his mind. It is difficult perhaps for even the most humble-minded of women to refrain from wondering, when she meets the man who has once loved her, if he does not love her still; but many a man standing in the very presence of her who has loved him best, who will love him longest, forgets that she has loved him at all. Simon forgot that Bertha had loved him, and remembered only that she was his own flesh and blood, that she was gentle and tender, and that it was sweet to turn to some one in his need.

"Bertha," he said, "I saw Rachel last night. She was coming from the play-house; and the gallants were pressing round her, and she leaned upon the arm of one Mr. Brummel, who is, I suppose, a leader of fashion here."

"He leads the fashion everywhere," put in Bertha.

"Their talk was very foolish," he went on; "but she joined in it, and laughed and seemed to like it. Bertha, she does not seem to suffer at all. Is it not strange that she should not suffer when I suffer so much?"

The morning must have been very chilly, for Bertha shivered again and bent more closely over the fire.

"It is certainly very strange, Cousin," she said; "very strange indeed. It is one of the most extraordinary things in life that one person should love so much, and suffer so keenly, and another should feel—nothing!"

She spoke passionately, but presently went on in an altered tone. "I do not say, however, that Rachel feels nothing. She is changed—I do not think she is really happy."

"She was laughing very gaily when they carried her away," said Simon. "They had made a wager, and

they carried her away in this Brummel's sedan-chair. It was by her own wish—but I was surprised. I did not think that Rachel would have lent herself to such things. She was so shocked and so unhappy once at being made the subject of a wager. She must indeed be changed. And yet I cannot feel that all this folly is more than surface deep. The real Rachel is my Rachel still."

He raised his head now, and crossed the room to the hearth. "I must speak with her, Bertha," he said. "I must see her alone. Will you contrive a meeting for us here?"

He was looking down absently upon Bertha's face, and suddenly saw it glow with colour, but never knew that it was not the heat of the fire which had called up that flush.

"Would it be so very difficult?" he inquired, wondering at her long silence.

"A little difficult, perhaps," said Bertha; "but it may yet be managed. My brother would not have me ask Rachel to the house. He seems to hate her now as much as he once liked her. He and a certain Sir Walter Brooke are never done abusing her. There were some horrid, vulgar verses printed about her some time ago which Sir Walter sent to my brother, and which Edward took with him to London. Indeed, I fear Rachel has many enemies: her own cousin, who should by right protect her, is one of the first to spread tales about her."

"Madam Charnock was right," thought Simon. "It was Humphrey who sent her that libellous paper. Perhaps he obtained it from Edward Gifford."

A burning resentment took possession of him: how was it possible that these two men, who had known Rachel in all the glory of her spring-like bloom and freshness, who had broken bread at her table, and sunned themselves in the light of her innocent eyes, should be the first to defame

her? And one of these men had called himself her lover—one was actually her kinsman! While he stood thus gloomily musing, Bertha glanced up suddenly.

"I will do my best to help you, Cousin. I will try and arrange a meeting for you and Rachel this evening when my mother has retired. My mother is in very delicate health, and I think the emotion of seeing you might be too much for her. I will not tell her that you are here. Do you wish me to let Rachel know whom she will meet here, or shall I merely ask her to spend the evening without entering into particulars?"

Simon took a hurried turn up and down the room.

"I fear me, Bertha, that if she thought to see me she would not come."

"Then I will say nothing," said Bertha. "I will despatch a note at once; will you not wait, Cousin, until the answer comes? The messenger will return in less than an hour."

Simon agreed, and the cousins passed the time of waiting in conversation on more general topics. Bertha had now quite regained her self-possession, and found a curious pleasure in his company. When the longed-for note arrived she handed it to him with a little smile.

"All is well: she has promised to come. She will slip away after dinner, she says, when Lady Susan is engaged with her friends."

And as she marked the sudden lighting-up of Simon's face her own was irradiated too, with a joy that was purely unselfish. After all she could work for him; she could help him. It might be given to her to bring back to him his lost happiness: there was comfort in the thought.

Presently he took his leave, promising to return a little before the hour at which Rachel was to make her appearance. But he was destined to see his wife sooner than he looked for.

Scarcely knowing where to betake himself on quitting the Gifford's house, he fell to wandering aimlessly about the Steine, abstractedly scanning the groups of fashionable folk who, though it was still early in the afternoon, were endeavouring to kill time by lounging near the libraries or lolling on the settles. It was perchance some latent hope of coming across Rachel which led him to linger there, for certainly human nature as there represented was little to his taste. It would have been difficult to say which were the most obnoxious to him—the men, pomatumed and perfumed, with their ringlets and their waists; or the women with their strange and, in his eyes, immodest attire, their bold eyes, their loud voices. Now and then fragments of talk reached him; he frowned at some; he positively shuddered at others—was it actually from the lips of yonder fine lady that had proceeded the oath which had just greeted his ears? Why, there it came again! Simon, who was as God-fearing as he was manly, as reverent of mind as he was clean of heart, felt his honest gorge rise within him as he looked and listened. Good Heavens! to think that Rachel—his Rachel—was in the very heart of this fashionable Brighton world!

Almost at the moment that this thought pierced his mind he became conscious of a certain stir and excitement in his neighbourhood. Three or four gentlemen and one lady were pacing slowly towards him; the lady was Rachel. As Simon stood stock still, gazing fixedly at the party, he observed that the portly man in the centre of the group was responding by gracious salutes and airy waves of the hand to the respectful greetings of all who passed him; and on nearer approach the yeoman recognised the features of the personage who had been pointed out to him on the previous evening as the Prince of Wales. He walked on Rachel's right, and on her left was Beau Brummel. The rest of the party was com-

posed of satellites of the Prince, unknown to Simon. The face of the Heir to the Throne was much flushed, and he was talking excitedly across Rachel to Brummel, who was smiling somewhat ironically, and interposing an occasional quiet word. Rachel was looking from one to the other; now and then her laugh rang out—the laugh which had been wont to sound like music in Simon's ears, but which now he could scarcely bear to hear. On they came, now they were but a dozen yards away, now scarcely six; and now, waking as though from a dream, Simon suddenly stepped forward.

"Rachel!" he cried.

The whole party came to a standstill. The Prince stared in astonishment: what manner of man was this who, while all well-behaved persons dutifully fell back at the approach of Royalty, dared thus to bar its progress? Mr. Brummel's expressive eyebrows were uplifted, and he affixed his quizzing-glass to his eye, but was too well-bred to make any other demonstration of surprise; various choice expletives testified to the satellites' opinion of the stranger's indecorum. As for Rachel, she paused as if thunderstruck; her eyes grew round with wonder and a kind of fear, and every vestige of colour left her face—but only for a moment. Then, with an imperious wave of her hand, she made as if she would pass on.

"Have the kindness to stand aside, sir," said Mr. Brummel, stepping up to Simon. "Do you not see that you are in his Royal Highness' way?"

But even that high-sounding title failed to overawe the unsophisticated yeoman. Thrusting out one great hand he brushed the beau aside as though he had been a fly, and came a step nearer to his wife. "Rachel," he said again, in a voice that vibrated with emotion, "oh, Rachel, would you pass me by?"

"There is some mystery here, Miss Charnock," quoth

the Prince with rather a forced laugh. "It would perhaps be more discreet for us to retire and suffer you to converse at your ease with this gentleman."

"Nay, sir," interposed Brummel; "I can scarcely imagine that such an unmannerly fellow is likely to be on intimate terms with Miss Charnock."

Rachel's glance had wavered beneath Simon's ardent gaze, and he thought he saw her tremble; but with a visible effort she now raised her eyes again, and looked him full in the face.

"There is a mistake," she said; "the gentleman is misled by appearances. It is possible that I may remind him of another Rachel whom he knew, but let him be assured that I am quite another person."

Again she would have passed on but again he stopped her, drawing so near this time that she shrank back lest he should touch her.

"I am not deceived," he said in a low voice. "It may be that I know you better than you know yourself."

He spoke so low that no one but Rachel heard the words. She threw him another scared look, and then suddenly darted past him. In another moment, jesting and laughing, the whole party had strolled on.

Simon stood as though rooted to the ground, oblivious of the curious looks and meaning smiles of those who had been spectators of the little scene. By-and-bye, with a deep sigh, he was preparing to move away, when his eyes suddenly met the watchful gaze of other eyes which had been fixed on him for some moments eagerly and questioningly. A lady, handsomely but very quietly dressed, had sat leaning back in the corner of one of the rustic high-backed seats, or "settles," before alluded to, her face half screened by her fringed parasol. As the royal party passed on she had lowered this, and was now bending forward, earnestly considering the young yeoman.

Something familiar in her face, as well as the anxious, almost pleading query in her gaze, arrested his attention. He paused, hesitated, but, as the lady apparently in confusion turned away her head, he came to the conclusion that he had been mistaken in supposing she wished to address him, and walked on, soon forgetting the little incident in the overwhelming sense of his own misery.

Actuated merely by the desire to escape from this vapid throng, he bent his steps towards the bottom of the Steine, and presently found himself near the Alcove, a small summer-house, at that moment deserted. Throwing himself upon a bench he sat gazing drearily seawards, endeavouring to collect his thoughts, and to fix upon some definite plan of action. Rachel had publicly denied him—what result would he hope to gain from the projected interview that evening? She had looked him full in the face, and deliberately refused to acknowledge so much as acquaintanceship with him—and yet—and yet—those bright eyes of hers had for a moment drooped before his, the proud lip had quivered, when he had first accosted her.

At this point his meditations were interrupted by the entrance of two persons, whom at first sight Simon identified as belonging to the order of beings which he had of late learnt to detest most cordially. They were, indeed, dandies of the very first water, and close imitators of their leader, Mr. Brummel. Lolling on the seat at some little distance from the yeoman, they attracted his attention to their discourse by invoking the name of their patron saint.

"Brummel! By —— sir! 'tis not Brummel: George is too old a bird to be caught even with such tempting chaff. No, sir, George would never commit himself with a penniless damsel, no matter how pretty she may

be. When George makes a proposal—which he occasionally does by way of paying a special compliment—he takes devilish good care to make sure first that the lady won't accept him. But this girl, d——n me, man, I believe she'd jump at him!"

"He looks monstrous sour if she talks to any one else though. I myself have had some experience of that," replied the other young gentleman, with a conscious little smirk which made Simon's blood boil, for somehow he imagined they were speaking of Rachel.

"Nay, 'tis not Brummel," went on the first speaker; "the young lady stalks bigger game, I assure you. Why, my boy, have you not heard that the well-known symptoms have declared themselves in a certain quarter? Two surgeons were sent for t'other night to bleed the Royal Patient ——"

"What for?" queried his friend, staring incredulously.

"Why, what an innocent is this! Have you never heard about it? 'Tis the regular thing when Big Ben, as Brummel calls him ——"

"No, does he? Why does he call him Big Ben?" interrupted the other.

"Verily, my friend, if it were not for the fact that you are but just back from foreign parts I should scarce know how to excuse such ignorance. Never to have heard of Brummel's nickname for the Prince—one of his nicknames at least. He calls him Big Ben because he is so d——d big, to be sure; there is a huge porter of the name at Carlton House, whom George thinks like his Royal Highness, so has christened him after him, and he dubs Mrs. Fitz Benina—there is no love lost between those two, I promise you. Well, as I was saying, the usual symptoms have declared themselves. He sighs like a volcano; he grows pale, they tell me, and tightens his stays daily; he eats somewhat less than

usual, and drinks somewhat more. And then he is bled —that with him is the infallible sign that the passion is serious. It is said in Lady Jersey's day he was bled four times in twenty-four hours—sends for different doctors, you know, so that there may be no refusal on account of his having been cupped before."

"Gad!" ejaculated the other, "what a senseless thing to do! I can understand a little blood-letting being soothing to the feelings, but d——n me, I prefer it to be another man's. So Mrs. Fitz does not love our friend?"

"No, truly; as little as she loves Fox himself. She had a personal grievance against *him*—aye, I've heard her say he rolled her in the gutter."

"In the gutter?" returned the other young fop, dropping his jaw with so bewildered an air that his friend burst out laughing.

"Why, what a blessed babe—too innocent for this naughty world! Surely, Charley, you have heard of Fox's famous speech in the House, when he declared that Mrs. Fitz not only wasn't, but shouldn't, couldn't, and wouldn't, by any possibility, ever be the Prince's wife. But, bless me, 'tis a good many years ago—you were scarce weaned then. Well, he said so, and the poor lady, who they say *has* got her marriage lines laid by in safety somewhere, took it mighty ill, and has never forgiven him. She dislikes Brummel for a different cause. She thinks he leads the pretty little Royal dear into mischief. Why, my boy, 'tis he who introduced him to the lovely Charnock!"

Simon had been listening uneasily to this conversation, now telling himself that his supposition that the two men were alluding to Rachel was merely the effect of his diseased fancy, now turning sick with the dread that she had indeed made herself so notorious in that accursed place that her name was in every one's mouth. At the actual sound of this name he sprang to his feet, and was

on the point of angrily taking the two speakers to task for their impertinence, when a shadow suddenly fell across the sunlit entrance to the enclosure, and the young gentlemen simultaneously rose.

"Talk of the devil," he heard one of them mutter; and in another moment a lady crossed the threshold and looked inquiringly around.

It was the same lady whom Simon had before noticed; but the recent conversation had given him a clue, and he now recalled when and where he had previously seen her. It was in the Prince's "box" the night before. This dignified, sweet-faced lady was no other than Mrs. Fitzherbert herself.

She bowed to the two friends a little coldly, responded quietly to some trivial observation which they made, and finally sat down. The dandies took a respectful leave of her, and swaggered away, arm in arm; and then she turned, fixing once more her beautiful mournful eyes on Simon.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Thou art alone
(If thy rare qualities, sweet gentleness,
Thy meekness saint-like, wife-like government,
Obeying in commanding, and thy parts
Sovereign and pious else, could speak thee out)
The queen of earthly queens.

—SHAKESPEARE.

FOR a full minute Yeoman Fleetwood and the lady, who, if report said truly, was the true wife of the Heir to the Throne, sat gazing earnestly at each other. Then Simon, removing his hat, rose, and said respectfully:—

"You wish to speak to me, madam?"

"Yes, sir," she answered a little tremulously; "I would fain exchange a word or two with you."

She paused, gazing once more appealingly at Simon with her anxious eyes. Very beautiful eyes they were: brown and soft, yet full of light—eyes so celebrated in their time that the art of the famous miniature painter Cosway was enlisted in the portrayal of one of them. Their gaze was troubled now, and her whole face clouded, but when she spoke her sympathy seemed all for Simon.

"I am sorry to perceive, sir, that you are in distress. I infer that you are new to this place; but I have been an interested observer of your meeting with a young lady who is very well known here. Is she also, may I ask, well known to you?"

Simon drew himself up a little stiffly, for he could scarce brook this fingering of his wound, however light and sympathetic might be the touch.

Half unconsciously the lady clasped her hands.

"I entreat you to be frank with me: my only wish is to befriend you. Have you known Miss Charnock long? Tell me truly. Has her conduct always been such as you, her friend, approve of?"

"Madam," returned Simon with gathering indignation, "I have known her ever since she was born. To me she is—she always will be—the first of women."

The lady's lip curled impatiently.

"You would hear a different story here," she cried quickly. "She is surrounded by such companions as I scarce think her well-wishers would choose for her. She has, moreover, made herself conspicuous in more ways than one. It is a pity," she continued, the habitually soft eyes kindling and the colour rushing into the fair face, "it is a pity that she should so misuse her gifts: her beauty—which is certainly above the common order—and that precious boon of youth."

"In what way, madam?" inquired Simon sternly.

"Why, to entrap men's hearts: to lead them astray, to win them from their rightful allegiance. Oh!" she cried passionately, "you to whom I am a stranger can know nothing of my motive in making this appeal, and for that reason I can speak plainly. Rachel Charnock has done me the greatest injury which one woman can do to another. Yes, indeed," she cried with increasing excitement, "I have suffered much from others, but till now have been able to hold my ground. I can compete with women of my own age—aye, I have known the favourite of the hour to be even older than myself. I can afford to despise most of those who would flatter themselves that they are my rivals, knowing well that the heart to which I have the highest claim—the only rightful claim—" she added emphatically, "has but wandered from me for a brief space; and will return to me, full of remorse and

renewed fondness. But this girl! No actress this, no harridan, a lady as well born as myself and *young!* Oh, is it not base to compete with me for the affections which are mine in the sight of God and man? How can I hold my ground when she takes the field? She, with that exquisite bloom, that freshness, that young gaiety and archness—everything is forgotten at sight of her—all that should be held most dear, most sacred."

Simon's indignation, which had increased during the first part of this speech, had suddenly subsided; the gaze which he turned on the agitated face was full of compassionate concern.

"You may trust me, madam," he said in a low voice, "though you are not such a stranger to me as you think; I know who your are, and I can feel for you."

Mrs. Fitzherbert drew back with a suprised and haughty glance; she was by nature a proud woman, and in spite of the many vicissitudes, the enforced humiliations, of her chequered career, she was a proud woman still. The blunt speech of this young countryman confounded and offended her; and she was, moreover, displeased with herself for the involuntary outburst which had called forth such a rejoinder. But when, fixing his kindly eyes upon her, Simon repeated with the utmost simplicity and sincerity the assurance of his sympathy, she was disarmed. This was a strange man, but, as she instinctively felt, a good and true one.

After a moment's pause she extended her hand to him with a pretty, gentle dignity, and all at once smiled: she had a peculiarly charming smile, bright and sweet; dimples played about her mouth the while, and her eyes, hitherto so mournful, laughed too. Looking at her thus one divined the fascination which had so long held captive the usually fickle heart of her princely partner.

"My good friend," said she, "you are somewhat abrupt, but I believe that you mean well. Since you know me, I must know you. Pray, tell me your name and where you come from."

"My name, madam, is Simon Fleetwood. I am a yeoman by birth, and I come from Lancashire, from the neighbourhood of Charnleigh Hall. My home is close beside Rachel Charnock's, and we have known each other all our lives."

"Ah, and you have come here doubtless to see her? Poor fellow! I witnessed the manner of your meeting. Nevertheless, you have influence with the girl—I saw it in her face to-day. Listen to me, sir: take her away from this place—take her away at once. She has already ruined the happiness of others, she will ruin herself unless something is done speedily. You love her, I see it—unworthy as she is of any good man's love—and something tells me that for all her flightiness the creature loves you, too."

"Madam," cried Simon, suddenly in a white heat, "I will not hear her spoken of thus. If she has rashly put it in the power of malicious tongues to traduce her, others are more to blame than she. She has been more sinned against than she has sinned. Oh, madam," he cried, pacing up and down the little enclosure with great agitation, for the lady's chance words had raised within him such a tumult of love and hope, wrath and self-reproach, that he could scarce speak rationally, "oh, madam, think of it! She was a child, all innocence, all trust; she knew nothing of the ways of the world—scarce anything of life itself. She owes her present plight to the selfish passion of a man who should have known better. One who took advantage of her inexperience, who abused his power, who, though by his very birth cut off from her, was base enough to press a suit that could but wreck

her life. My eyes are opened now at last! Oh, horrible selfishness—vile cruelty!"

"Sir!" cried the lady, rising in her turn, and drawing up to its full height a figure which, though not very tall, conveyed at times an impression of dignity and majesty, and never more so than at this moment. "Sir! you forget to whom you are speaking; you insult me. Knowing as you do my circumstances, do you dare to speak thus of the Prince in my hearing?"

"The Prince!" ejaculated Simon, gazing at her in amazement. "Nay, madam, I was not speaking of the Prince."

"Of whom, then?" she burst forth, her colour still coming and going quickly, and her eyes aflame.

"Madam," said Simon, dropping his eyes, "I spoke of myself."

The surprised revulsion of feeling, was so great that Mrs. Fitzherbert laughed outright; then, composing her features, she gazed incredulously at the yeoman.

"You!" she cried. "Nay, friend, your face belies you if you have ever wilfully wronged a woman."

"Oh, madam," cried he, "is not a woman wronged by being urged into an unequal marriage? I gauged her nature by my own—I withheld the truth from her—my love was so great I thought it made all between us even; but I see now that I was wrong."

At the first impetuous words Mrs. Fitzherbert had started as though stung; she now looked at Simon, with the colour deepening in her face, in a manner which would have seemed to him inexplicable had he not been wholly occupied with his own concerns.

"She was such a child," he went on in a voice of passionate regret; "she did not understand the nature of the contract into which she was entering. I should have opened her eyes; I should have made sure that she knew

what she was doing, that she realised the consequences. Oh, she should never have been suffered to take such a step—there should have been no irregularity about *her* marriage."

He seemed to have forgotten Mrs. Fitzherbert's presence, but she now recalled it to him by touching him lightly on the arm.

"You interest me very much, Mr. Fleetwood," she said; "more than I can say. Let me hear the whole story, I beg you. From the hints you have dropped, I fancy—I gather it is in many respects like—well, it is of special interest to me. Tell me. I may be able to help and befriend you, more perhaps than you think of. Do you really mean to say that Rachel Charnock is actually your wife?"

Thus adjured, and encouraged by her very real concern and sympathy, Simon told his tale; the lady listening in evident emotion, and now and then interrupting him by a little interjection or a deep sigh.

At its conclusion silence fell between them, broken only by the leaping of the waves upon the beach. Mrs. Fitzherbert sat gazing out to sea, her brows knit, apparently lost in thought, and poor Simon, his transitory excitement passed, relapsed into his former dejection. What a pitiful entanglement was this—each day seemed to render the possibility of unravelling it more and more unlikely. His companion's voice broke in suddenly upon his gloomy thoughts.

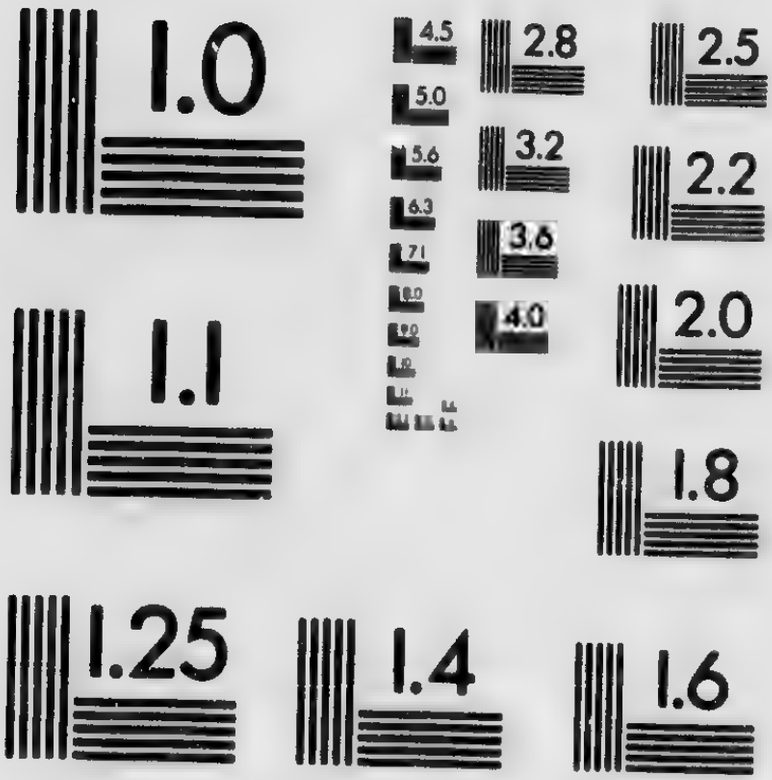
"Your story, Mr. Fleetwood, moves me deeply; I can sympathise with you, perhaps, more fully than any other human being."

Simon turned his heavy eyes upon her in surprise, and then it suddenly flashed upon him that there was in many respects a certain resemblance between his own situation and that of the unfortunate lady at his



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side. Both he, the yeoman, and she, the noble dame, had fixed their affections too high for happiness; each was secretly bound to a mate upon whom in the eyes of the world they had no claim; both had most suffered where they had most loved. The nearer each was to the attainment of his or her dearest hope the better it would be for the other. They had, above all, one thing in common—a great and wholly disinterested love. Mrs. Fitzherbert had refused with scorn the titles and emoluments with which the Prince and his party sought to endow her: her attachment to the man who had so grievously tried her patience being entirely personal. Simon, as we know, had no keener desire than to devote himself and all his substance to the service of his lady; his wish had been, not to raise himself to her sphere, but to make her content in his.

"We have, indeed, common interests at stake," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, putting his thoughts into words. "In helping each other, we help ourselves. Come, sir, do not look so doleful. This revelation of yours gives me much hope. If we work together we must achieve our end."

"I would that I could hope," said Simon; "but you yourself saw, madam, how she passed me by. I am to meet her to-night at my cousin's house, yet I fear that little good will come of the interview. She is too proud to go back upon her word."

"Nay, I have no patience with such pride as that," cried the other angrily. "When a woman solemnly vows to take a certain man for her husband, and to cleave to him till death, is there no perjury, think you, in revoking such a pledge?"

Simon was about to speak, but she checked him quickly. "Good Heavens! how can she esteem herself released from the sacredness of such a vow? She is

not released. She is irrevocably bound to you; aye, and would be had you betrayed her confidence in far graver matters. She is too proud, forsooth, to go back upon her word! Sir, does she realise the meaning of the marriage vow, 'For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in health and in sickness—till death!' What though the marriage was, as you say, irregular—the intention was there, the solemn promise which binds, yes, and will bind, let one's enemies say what they will, till death breaks it."

Her cheeks were flushed, and she breathed quickly; but there was something moving, even noble in her aspect. "Aye, through evil repute and good repute a woman should cleave to her husband," she said; "bear with him—forgive him, were it seventy times seven times. When tried almost beyond endurance, let her comfort herself still with the reflection that she is doing her duty, fulfilling the Will of God. That, sir, I take it, should be a woman's pride."

Simon was silent, for he knew that she spoke more in reference to herself than to Rachel. When rumours had formerly reached him of Mrs. Fitzherbert's return to the Prince of Wales after the banishment of Princess Caroline, Simon had, like many others, wondered and condemned; but now he could feel nothing but compassion and respect for the brave woman who, in her determination to fulfil her wifely duty, had defied the world. Wife, no doubt, she was, if the marriage ceremony could make her one; and if she had been rash in setting at naught the statutes which would have made of such alliances mere amorous freaks of inflammable princelings, surely she might be excused for the hope that the same authority which had made these statutes could be induced to annul them. Be that as it might, she considered herself irrevocably bound to the man

whom she had taken as her husband; she had the courage to obey a higher law than those so easily made and broken, the law of her own conscience—God's law. But while Simon gazed at her kindly and pityingly, she threw him a glance that was at once proud and scornful.

"As for you, sir," she cried, "have you no sense of your responsibilities? Did not you vow to cherish and protect your wife? Yet in your pique you would abandon her to her own resources. I tell you, sir, I hold you scarcely less guilty in having condoned her abandonment of you".

The blood mounted to Simon's brow.

"I had not looked on the matter in that light," he said.

"I tell you, you must assert yourself; for her own good you must coerce her," went on Mrs. Fitzherbert eagerly. "In the interests of morality, as well as in your own interests and hers, you should make known your marriage. The announcement would have great effect in removing the dangers which surround her. Some of her admirers would be piqued at her concealment of the fact—others again would lose their interest in the leader of fashion, who is, after all, but a simple yeoman's wife."

"I am indeed sick of concealment," he murmured in a low voice. "Yet I should be loath to bring her to shame and confusion. Oh, if she could but be induced of her own accord to own me as her husband! Well, I will try what I can do to[illegible]ht."

The lady shrugged her [illegible]oulders. "Are you so weak," she cried, "that when your duty stares you in the face you shrink from it? Do what is right, sir, and take the consequences. And now I must leave you. Let us not lose sight of each other. I beg, sir, that you will make known to me the result of this interview—you will easily find my house, and if you will send in your name, I shall be happy to receive you at any time."

She spoke with an assumption of gracious condescension, at variance with her haggard face and anxious eyes. Both rose, and Simon bowed over the hand which she extended to him.

"I will wait on you without fail, madam," he said, "when I have anything of importance to communicate."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Ask me no more: the moon may draw the sea,
The cloud may stoop from heaven and take the shape,
With fold to fold, of mountain or of cape:
But O, too fond, when have I answer'd thee?
Ask me no more.

—TENNYSON.

A LITTLE before the appointed hour Simon was admitted into the Gifford's house, and found Bertha waiting for him alone in a small room on the ground floor. As the door closed behind him she ran towards him, wringing her hands; her face was paler than its wont, and she had evidently been weeping.

"Alas, Cousin," she cried, "I have no good news for you! All our plans have come to naught."

"She refuses to come," exclaimed Simon.

"She will not meet you," returned Bertha falteringly. "She came here this afternoon—burst in upon me like a whirlwind, and raved and stormed—I protest she frightened me. It seems she caught sight of you to-day, and at once divined the motive of my invitation."

"She will not meet me," repeated Simon, half to himself, "she will not meet me."

"Indeed she was emphatic on that point," went on his cousin, somewhat reassured by his apparent calm. "She accused me of treachery for having endeavoured to decoy her hither, and taxed me, moreover, with being the cause of your sudden appearance in this place. 'Did you or did you not write to him about me,' she

asked me; and pressed the question home till I was forced to own that she had guessed aright."

"You did well to tell her the truth," said Fleetwood quietly. "It is much better that she should know."

"Ah, but if you had seen her fury—I am trembling from it still. She called me a false friend, and vowed that I had no business to spread slanders about her. How dared I, she cried, bring you to a spot where her name was so calumniated? Then, in the same breath, she vowed that if you must needs come here to spy and listen to tittle-tattle it would serve you right if you heard more than you bargained for. And then she laughed and clapped her hands, and declared that she was glad you had come—glad that your precious susceptibilities would be so shocked. I sought to take her hand and to make her hear reason, but she shook me off, calling me false and perjured; and all of a sudden burst into tears, and cried that she had not a friend in the world. She was sobbing, Cousin, when she left the house."

She looked piteously at Simon as she concluded her tale, and saw to her surprise that his face had grown hard and stern. He made no immediate rejoinder, however, but after a moment took his hat from the table, where he had laid it on entering, and then stretched out his hand to her.

"Good-bye, Bertha," he said, "you have done your best, and I thank you."

"What will you do now, Simon?" Bertha was timidly beginning, but the words died upon her lips as she glanced at his set face. He left her without further speech, and on reaching the street bent his steps in the direction of Lady Susan Harding's house. The words spoken so emphatically by Mrs. Fitzherbert that day were now ringing in his ears, echoing in his heart: "You

must coerce her for her own good. Your duty stares you in the face."

In answer to his thundering knock a servant came in haste, and stood a moment staring in blank amazement at the visitor. Recovering himself, however, as Simon imperatively demanded to see Miss Charnock, he replied with a smile of derision that that was quite impossible. There was company to dinner, and the ladies had not yet left the dining-room.

"You can take her a note, I suppose?" said the yeoman, after brief reflection.

"Why, yes," replied the man, scratching his jaw; "I could do that, particular if 'twas made worth my while."

Simon, having drawn close to the hanging lamp, was already in the act of scribbling a few lines on a leaf torn from his pocket-book, and now looked up hastily.

"You want money, I suppose? You shall have it if you give it to her quickly."

The fellow became obsequious in a moment.

"You see, sir, 'tisn't the will that is lacking—I have my place to think about. Her ladyship's eyes are that sharp! But there—I'll make a shift to give it her if you'll please to hurry up, sir."

Having no way of fastening his missive, Simon was forced to be very guarded in the wording of it. After writing and tearing up one or two notes, he finally despatched the following:—

"The time has come for me to act. I cannot suffer the present state of affairs to continue. Will you see me? I would fain spare you all unnecessary publicity and annoyance."

He signed it with his initials, twisted it up, and handed it to the servant.

"There," he said, "give that to Miss Charnock, and

fetch me back the answer quickly; you shall have a guinea for your pains."

The man withdrew, taking the precaution to close the door; and Simon was left to drum his heels upon the pavement, and to master his impatience as best he might. After what seemed a long time the door opened hastily, and the servant reappeared.

"Here—where's that quid? Hand it over and get out, will you? That was a d——d mean trick o' yours, and like to get me into trouble!"

"Is there no answer?" inquired Simon unsteadily.

"No answer? Like your impudence! What do you mean by making me carry threatening letters, eh?"

"Threatening letters! What do you mean?"

"Why, the young lady said so herself. I give it her as she came out of the dining-room, and she tore it into twenty bits and threw it on the ground. 'What have you got there?' says her ladyship, not best pleased, I can tell you. 'A threatening letter, madam,' says Miss Charnock. Then her ladyship screeches out as we was all goin' to be robbed and murdered, and asks me who left the letter, and when it was left, and what not, till I was very nigh crazy. I told her 'twas brought by a little boy an hour ago."

"Miss Charnock sent no message, you say?" said Simon, but half comprehending the tale.

"No; she tore up the note, and said 'twas a threatening letter, and deserved to have no notice taken of it. Aye, sir, she said that. Now, be off, I say."

"Wait a bit," resumed the yeoman. "The ladies have left the dining-room, you say?"

"That they have. I must take coffee in directly."

"Listen. Tell Miss Charnock privately that the writer of the note is waiting for an answer. Do you hear? That message will be worth another guinea to you."

"Another? Come, you seem to have plenty of 'em! I don't much like this 'ere kind of work, but a few words is easy spoke."

Again he slammed the door to. This time he was not long in reappearing. Taking the precaution of holding the door only partially open, he thrust his head out with an insolent grin.

"Hand over. Well," pocketing the coin, "the answer is, you may wait and perhaps you'll see something. He, he! That was it. 'Let him wait,' says she, 'and he will see what he will see.' Well, 'tis a fine night: you'd best take a seat upon the step."

With that he vanished, leaving Simon in a state of mind which can scarcely be described. At one moment he imagined that the fellow must have invented the message, and again an idea struck him, recurring with maddening persistency, that the words conveyed a threat, and that Rachel did indeed wish him to stay to witness some act of hers which must incense and disgust him. Now he turned from the door as though to leave; and then returned: he would wait, he would see for himself the real portent of the message. So he paced up and down before the door, at first in devouring impatience, and afterwards with sickness of heart.

The minutes passed away, and the distant Pavilion clock chimed out for the second time since he had kept his eager watch; he had almost reached the limits of his endurance when the rapid sound of wheels made him start, and a coach and four came swinging round the corner of the street, pulling up with a flourish at Lady Susan's house. One of the footmen, alighting presented himself at the door of the vehicle, and a man's voice drawled out:—

"Pray, let Captain Montague be acquainted that I wait his convenience to carry him to the Pavilion. Present

also my compliments to Mr. Brummel, and let him be informed that if he can make up his mind to enter my coach I shall be happy to give him a seat."

The lackey brushed past Simon and vigorously plied the knocker. On the door being opened he repeated his master's message in a loud and imperative voice, and Lady Susan's servant at once retired to carry it on. Simon, well pleased at the early break-up of the party, resolved to bide his time until the guests had departed, and then to present himself afresh—if needs were to force his way into the house. His wish to remain undiscovered, however, was frustrated on the reappearance of the servant, who came hurrying back excitedly, and who, when on the point of making some confidence to his brother in livery, started back at the sight of the yeoman's tall figure.

"You here still!" he exclaimed under his breath. "Get out—be off at once, else there'll be the devil to pay. Her ladyship's coming down herself."

At this moment a tumult of voices was heard upon the stairs, together with the sound of hurrying feet.

"I tell you, I will! I will go if I like. You had no right to refuse without consulting me. It is nothing to me if *you* don't come. I'll wager the Prince will be just as well pleased to see me without you."

Simon's heart stood still: it was Rachel's voice, raised high in anger. Some indignant rejoinder which Simon did not catch came from the landing, and then Rachel's tones rang out again.

"Madam, I shall be well taken care of, I assure you; these gentlemen will be most happy to look after me, and Lord Robert will give me the best seat in his coach."

He could hear the men rejoin in a laughing murmur, and then Lady Susan's reply, now quite distinguishable, the lady having evidently descended the stairs.

"'Tis disgraceful—intolerable! I tell you, Rachel, the town will be ringing with your name to-morrow."

"Just what I want," returned Rachel; "I like to be talked about." She suddenly appeared on the threshold, and darted a searching glance out into the night.

Simon instinctively felt that she was looking for him, but was for the moment incapable of speech or movement.

"Pray, Lord Robert," she called out, "will you honour me by giving me a seat? I, too, am going to the Pavilion."

A head was thrust from the window of the coach, and the drawling, somewhat cracked tones of the master of the equipage responded that it was indeed a most delightful surprise, and Miss Charnock was a thousand times welcome.

"No, Lord Robert; 'tis but a piece of folly," screamed Lady Susan, rushing out as Rachel was about to make her way towards the vehicle. "I'll not hear of it, Rachel, I tell you. If you care nothing for your own good name, I vow my house shall be respected."

Rachel shrugged her shoulders. "That, your ladyship, would be a new state of affairs," she cried; and shook herself free from the hand that would have detained her.

"You little hussy!" shrieked her ladyship, qualifying the epithet with an adjective which will not bear repeating. "I've had enough of this. If you are bent on disgracing yourself, do so; but do not think to make your home with me afterwards. If you leave my house to-night, miss, you do so for ever. Do not seek to return, for you will find my doors closed to you."

"As to that," retorted Rachel, "I can easily find accommodation elsewhere. There are inns in the town,

I believe—there are even taverns, quite as respectable as this mansion of your ladyship's."

She was preparing to descend the steps when Simon, recovering from his stupor, rushed forward. This outrageous piece of folly must be averted at all cost; he must speak to her now, even though he were overheard by those grinning servants.

"Stop!" he cried hoarsely, and flung out his arm to bar her progress; but she deftly eluded him and ran quickly towards the coach. Lady Susan's attention was momentarily diverted, and she screamed violently at the sudden appearance of this dark gigantic figure, declaring, with an oath, that he must be either a murderer or a highwayman, and charging all who heard her to seize him and call the watch. Simon turned towards her for a moment:—

"Have no fear, madam, I have no wish to hurt any one. My business is with Miss Charnock—Rachel, I forbid you to enter that coach."

But Rachel was already plucking at the door. Lord Robert's second servant, who had descended and was standing by the vehicle, hastened to assist her. In another moment she had disappeared into the interior of the vehicle.

"Ah!" screamed Lady Susan, "what a H—— of a cat you are! So this is your doing, madam. Pray, who may this beggarly fellow be?"

"Drive on, drive on," cried Rachel, without heeding her.

Captain Montague hastened down the steps, and pushing past Simon, leaped, in his turn, into the carriage.

"Are you coming, Brummel?" he cried.

"Not I," replied Brummel. "Reputations are cheap to-night, but, hang it, I still set a certain value on mine."

"Drive on, drive on," cried the cracked, impatient tones of my lord.

"I say, Stop!" shouted Simon, thrusting his head into the coach window. "I must speak—Rachel!"

"Here, out of the way," cried one of the burly footmen, endeavouring to shoulder him on one side.

Rachel leaned forward, her white face but a few inches away from his. "Good God! is not this enough for you?"

The next moment Simon found himself tripped up, and before he could realise what had happened, fell heavily to the ground, as with an insolent laugh the two lackeys leaped to their perch, and the coach swung past him. They were already out of sight when Simon rose to his feet to find Lady Susan's servant sniggering at his elbow, and Mr. Brummel surveying him through his eye-glass.

"What, my worthy friend, it is you, is it? You are persevering truly. Take my advice and give up the chase; she's not worth your pursuit. Oh, these women! Dear distracting creatures! Hark to Lady Susan! Pray, my dear madam, have some respect for our ears and our morals."

The strident tones of her ladyship's voice and the nature of her vituperations were indeed such as to call forth this remonstrance.

"I mean what I say," she shrieked. "The little wretch may go to the devil as fast as she likes now—I've done with her. Do you hear, John? If Miss Charnock returns to-night you are not to let her in, I say. Not to-night, nor at any other time. Tell all the servants this. I'll be hanged if she shall ever cross my threshold again."

"I have a horror of such scenes," said Brummel plaintively; speaking, it must be conjectured, rather to himself than to any one else, for Lady Susan was not in a

condition to heed him, and it cannot be presumed that after his few words of careless recognition the beau would again stoop to honour with his notice a person so insignificant as Simon.

But in any case the yeoman had had enough of his conversation, and was indeed already making with all speed from the hateful spot. His great limbs trembled as though he were smitten with the ague; his cheeks burned, his broad chest heaved—he could scarce breathe, so oppressed was he with a suffocating sense of rage and shame. Oh God! that she should thus disgrace herself and him. What would be the end? He must take her away, he must carry her away—if needs were, he *could* carry her away; but—how to obtain access to her? She had chosen her retreat cunningly. In his present mood he could force his way into any private house; but how penetrate into the presence of the Prince? Why had he not fought for her when she was actually within reach, instead of standing like one paralysed? Now every moment that passed increased the danger which threatened her and strengthened the barrier between them. Oh, could he but throw his arms about her—could he but hold her once again face to face, he would make her hear and heed him! As he ran or, rather, staggered onward through the night, his lips, in his extreme need, half unconsciously uttered the old prayer: "My God, my God, give her to me!"

All at once an idea came to him: he would consult Mrs. Fitzherbert. He had promised to wait upon her if he should have matter of importance to communicate, and she had announced her willingness to receive him at any hour. She perhaps, who best knew the temper of her Royal Lord, could direct Simon as to the course of action most advisable for him to pursue in the present emergency.

Without a moment's hesitation he turned in the direction of the lady's house, which, at his request, had been pointed out to him that afternoon, and lost no time in claiming admittance to her presence. It was then nearly ten o'clock, and the servant seemed surprised at Simon's seeking an audience at so late an hour. But Fleetwood's positive assurance that his mistress expected him prevailed, and he led the way into a small ante-room, divided by heavy curtains from a larger room beyond. Simon remained standing near the door, and the man was going forward to announce him when the curtains were drawn apart and a pretty little girl of about seven or eight years old ran through, calling joyfully, "Prinnie! Is that my Prinnie?"

She stopped short, uttering an exclamation of disappointment at sight of Simon, and the man went forward to the doorway where Mrs. Fitzherbert herself was now standing.

"Pray, come in, Mr Fleetwood," she said, turning a shade paler as she caught sight of his agitated face; "I am glad to see you. And you, my love," she added to the little girl, "must go to bed. You have sat up too long as it is."

"I want my Prince," said the child, bursting into tears.

"He will not come to-night, my dear," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, quietly. "I told you before, you know, that it was most improbable. He has a card party to-night. Now run away, my little one, and sleep sweetly. Good-night, good-night."

"My adopted child," she explained, looking towards Simon, as the little girl left the room; "the daughter of one of my dearest friends, who bequeathed her to me on her death-bed. I have been much harassed in connection with her, but her sweet affection repays me for

everything. The Prince, too, is devotedly attached to her—and you see how the poor child loves him. That in itself would be proof, if proof were wanting, of his goodness of heart. But tell me, what has happened—what about your meeting with—with your wife?"

"Oh, madam," groaned Simon, "I am well-nigh distracted. She would not see me—she defies me. I wrote to warn her of my intention to claim her publicly as my wife, and in her wrath she has taken a desperate step. She has this very night gone in the company of three gentlemen to the Pavilion. Lady Susan Harding refused to accompany her, and forbade her to go, and because she insisted, has forbidden her the house. I saw it—I heard it all. She bade the very servants refuse admittance to her if she sought shelter there to-night. But she, Rachel, was quite reckless. 'I will go to an inn, then,' said she. What is to become of her—how will it end?"

"She is at the Pavilion now, you tell me?" said the lady, sinking into a chair.

"Madam, she drove off in a coach, before my very eyes. I see her purpose. She is incensed at my endeavour to coerce her, and seeks so to scandalise and disgust me that I may no longer wish to claim her. She said she wanted the town to ring with the story, and that she liked being talked about. She looked me in the face and said: 'Is not this enough?' Oh, madam, I should have seized her in my arms then and borne her off. I should have been on the alert—but while I stood and looked, the servants came from behind and forced me from her."

"Good Heavens, what a story!" said the lady. "The girl must be mad."

"She is mad, madam, mad with pride and misery. She knows not what she is doing nor whither she is

going, and where is she to go? Madam, you must help me to take her away to-night."

"I help you!" repeated she bitterly. "My dear friend, there is no one in Brighton so little able to move in this matter as I. Do not the facts speak for themselves?"

"Surely you can at least tell me how I may obtain admittance yonder. Were I to go boldly and ask for Miss Charnock she would refuse to see me as she has already done."

"She would doubtless refuse—besides, that would be an impossible line of action. No, no; it is not to be thought of. Your only chance is to wait patiently until she comes out. You cannot, I think, miss her. Since, as you say, Lady Susan Harding has practically turned her out, she will be glad enough to be rescued by you from a very unpleasant predicament."

Simon groaned in his misery and impatience.

"Oh, madam, it is easy for you to speak calmly! Every moment that she remains in her present situation is agony to me. To think of her there, alone, unprotected, in the midst of that profligate crew! I *must* get to her. Can you contrive no means of procuring me admittance?"

"Do you suppose that this affair does not concern me?" said the lady.

She paused a moment, looking at him with drawn brows.

"There might be one way," she resumed, and then broke suddenly off. "No, no, I dare not—'tis too wild —'twould be impossible."

"Madam, I implore of you," besought Simon, "if there be *any* way let me know of it."

"No, no," she repeated hastily; "I was mad to think of it even for a moment. Listen, my good friend, calm

yourself. Your wife spoke of going to an inn to-night, did she not? You have, therefore, but to remain in the neighbourhood of the ordinary entrance to the Pavilion, and you must necessarily see her depart. I feel for you with all my heart—I feel, I may say, with you, but believe me, I am helpless. Go; God bless you. After all, we are in His hands. Go, go," she repeated, somewhat impatiently. "You must take up your post at once. This may be but a mere piece of bravado, and when the girl comes to her senses she will probably wish to leave before it grows too late. If you are not on the watch, you may miss her."

Thus adjured, Simon had no choice but to withdraw, and, feeling like a man in a nightmare, made his way to the Pavilion; taking up his stand at a point whence he had a good view of the entrance.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Sweet partner I must not yet forsake you. . . .
Let's be merry ;
. . . . . .
"I am a gentleman." I'll be sworn thou art ;
Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions and spirit
Do give thee five fold blazon.

—SHAKESPEARE.

THE eyes of the silent watcher were strained in the endeavour to lose no indication of the departure of the merry-makers within that strange and tawdry palace. His ears were so much on the alert that the mere throbbing of his own heart sounded unnaturally loud, while the breaking of the waters on the neighbouring beach, the more distant noises of the town, the very foot-falls of the passers-by, maddened him with the dread that such sounds might overpower those for which he longed—Rachel's footstep, Rachel's voice. By-and-bye, however, a kind of hush seemed to descend upon the place, broken only by the booming of the waves, and the chiming of the great Pavilion clock. Would that weary night never come to an end?

All at once a sudden clatter, coming from the direction on which his attention was concentrated, sent a shiver of expectation through his frame. Many voices talking and laughing together, shrill whistles piercing the night, chairmen and link-boys starting up, by magic, it would seem, from the very ground. Simon pressed forward eagerly—was she there? Might he not miss her amid the sudden confusion?

Hark! there were the cracked languid tones of Lord Robert. Was he talking to her? No, the figure to whom the voice belonged was in the act of being hoisted with some difficulty into a sedan-chair. As the yeoman looked round he observed that the guests now leaving the Pavilion, some it must be owned with a staggering and uncertain gait, were all of the male sex; in a few moments more they had melted away, and but for the sound of retreating steps and, voices, silence once more prevailed.

The deep-tongued clock struck out solemnly: *One!*

Obeying a sudden and uncontrollable impulse Simon hastened after two figures who were proceeding more slowly, if more steadily, than the others, and presently came up with them, his hurried steps causing them to turn in surprise. They were young men, their faces both being strange to him.

"How now," cried one; "what do you want, sir? If this is a foot-pad," he added to his companion, "he seems to be a bold one."

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," said Simon, "I would but ask a question. Has the party yonder," pointing in the direction of the Pavilion, "come to an end yet? I am waiting for one of the guests."

"I imagine, sir, you will have to wait some time; only a few of the Prince's immediate friends have remained. Having squeezed us dry his Royal Highness has been graciously pleased to dismiss the rest of us. The favoured few mean to make a night of it. I think 'tis scarce worth your while, sir, to wait any longer—they will probably continue to play until morning; besides, your friend has most likely taken his departure already. Pray, if the question may be permitted, what is his name?"

"It is of no consequence, sir," stammered Simon;

"excuse me for troubling you. Did you say that but a few gentlemen remain with the Prince?"

"Why, there's one lady—a host in herself, I assure you—a very devil at the dice-box. 'Twould be indiscreet to divulge her name."

"I—I have no wish to know her name," replied Fleetwood, in an almost inaudible voice.

"Why, by George, I believe the assignation was with her!" broke in the other young man, marking his confusion. "Ha! ha! this is an excellent joke! My dear sir, if you intend to wait for her, I should advise you to take a little nap upon the pavement, for you are likely to wait some hours. The young lady seems to be enjoying herself amazingly."

"'Twill be gross waste of your valuable time, I assure you," chimed in the first speaker. "But, since you know that she is happy and in excellent company, you will no doubt be able to console yourself."

Once more linking their arms together the two laughed loudly, and passed on.

Simon stood for a moment looking after them as they vanished into the gloom; then began to stride, almost to run, in the direction of Mrs. Fitzherbert's house. She had hinted that there *was* a way—an impracticable way—of forcing an entrance yonder. Let the consequences be what they might, he would risk them. Let that way be never so wild—be impossible, as she said—he must and would take it.

Here was Mrs. Fitzherbert's dwelling: he would rouse the folk within and insist on seeing her, even if they took him for a madman. But when he stood before the house he observed that one of the windows on the ground floor was unshuttered, and, by the light which burned within, could discern the outline of a figure seated just behind the half-drawn curtain, its shadow being thrown

upon the folds. As Simon's steps sounded through the stillness the shadow moved, the curtain was drawn a little farther back, and the figure, coming round it, approached the window and cautiously raised the sash.

"Who is there?" said a voice, which he recognised as that of Mrs. Fitzherbert herself.

"It is I, Simon Fleetwood. Madam, you must let me in."

"I knew you would come—I could not go to bed. Is there no news?"

"None, save that I hear they intend to make a night of it at the Pavilion. All the guests have gone except only the Prince's immediate friends; but she is still there. Let me in, madam."

"No, no—it would be of no use. How can I help you?"

"You can help me, and you *must* help me," said Simon in a passionate whisper; "you said there was a way by means of which I could obtain entrance yonder. Madam, you must tell me of it. Let me but see my wife, and I will answer for the rest. This time no one shall come between us—but I must get to her—I will take all risks. Oh, madam! think of what is at stake—by all that you hold sacred let me to her!"

Mrs. Fitzherbert pressed her hands wearily to her brow:—

"I might give you a note," she said, "a note to take to the Prince—you might say it was an urgent message from me. But even then it would scarce admit *you* into his presence. And then, sir, have you no thought for me—would you have me cast aside even my woman's dignity?"

"Madam," returned Simon sternly, "there are graver things at stake than a woman's dignity. In the name

of the God who made you, and to whom you must one day give an account, stretch out your hand now to save your sister woman in her peril."

She sighed, wrung her hands, and finally said, almost with a groan :—

"Well then, in God's name I will do it. Wait a moment, and I will come to you."

She closed the window, and drew the shutters across, fastening and bolting them, Simon meanwhile trembling with impatience—how could she wait to take such trumpery precautions when every moment was precious! A further delay ensued, but at length the house door opened very softly, and a cloaked and hooded figure passed through, closing it after her with the same stealthiness.

"Where are you?" she asked, and the glare of a lantern suddenly flashed out from beneath her cloak; identifying Simon's tall figure she immediately closed the slide, and all again was dark, save for the light of the moon and the uncertain glimmer of the occasional street lamps. She led the way, and Simon followed in absolute silence and with the nightmare-like sensation previously described strong upon him.

She paused at length, and Simon looking round him found that they had halted opposite a great archway, through which he could see a large square courtyard. Heaving a deep sigh his guide passed through this, and Simon accompanied her across the yard and under a corresponding archway on the opposite side. He heard the grating of a key and presently, to his astonishment, found himself in a large circular building, where, as Mrs. Fitzherbert again withdrew the slide from her lantern, the gleam of water in an immense reservoir caught his eye. Many doors opened out of this court, and from the unmistakable smell, and the frequent stamping of hoofs and

rattling of chains the yeoman guessed that horses must be in the neighbourhood. His surmise was correct, for he and his guide were actually standing in the centre of the royal stables.

He was about to speak, but she silenced him by putting a finger on her lip. Selecting another key from her bunch she unlocked a certain door, and signing to him to follow she began to descend some steps; by-and-bye they found themselves in a dark and narrow passage which apparently burrowed through the earth. On went the hooded figure carrying the light, and close behind came Simon, feeling more than ever like a man in a dream, and being obliged to stoop as he walked lest he should knock his head against the roof.

Once again they stopped: another door barred their progress. That on being opened gave access to an intricate staircase which wound up, and up, until at length, raising her arm, Mrs. Fitzherbert pushed back a trap-door and stepped out into a lighted room. Simon followed her, looking round him in amazement, half doubting even now that he was in truth awake, for the tawdry splendour of the place was unlike anything he had ever seen. Silken hangings of brilliant hues and barbaric design, a profusion of gilding, a multiplicity of lights even in this apparently disused chamber, curious ornaments representing birds and beasts such as had surely never walked the earth or hovered in the air—all was a medley so odd, so savage, so inharmonious, that Simon could never have even imagined the like.

But he was not left long to wonder, even had he been inclined to waste time in doing so, for Mrs. Fitzherbert beckoned him impatiently to follow her. On they went through another brilliantly lighted apartment, and then another, and now the sound of voices and loud laughter reached their ears. The lady suddenly

paused, turning on her companion a face in which no vestige of colour remained.

"I have done my part," she said, "the rest remains with you. If you are hard pressed you may use my name, but I fear me it will scarce protect you. If there is risk—if misfortunes overtake you—on your own head be it! But I wish you well. Go straight on and open that door—those you seek are there. Remember, you cannot return in this manner. I have brought you hither, but you must make your own way out."

"Madam, I understand," said Simon. "I am ready to take all consequences. I thank you, and I pray God to bless you."

Leaving her then, he hastened on to the door she had indicated, and she, with a deep sigh, retraced her steps and soon disappeared.

With his hand upon the handle of the door Simon paused one moment, an unspoken prayer in his heart; then it yielded to his hand, and he stepped into the room within. More tawdry splendour here, more gilding, more candles. Simon had eyes for none of these things, nor for the notable company which surrounded a great gilded card table. His eyes, as though attracted by a magnetic influence, fixed themselves at once on her of whom he had come in search. He saw her slight figure drooping with evident weariness; he saw her face, ghastly in the glaring light, haggard, with deep shadows under the great dilated eyes; the lips, those lovely lips which were wont to be so soft, drawn back in a kind of fixed and horrible smile; he saw the hands, the little hands which he had so loved to clasp and kiss, feverishly clutching a dice-box.

He had meant to advance boldly, to summon her imperatively, yet he found himself as it were paralysed, incapable of speech or movement. Then, as by magic,

every detail of the room became present to him: the candles guttering in their sockets, the air sickly with divers scents, in which the smell of wine predominated; the group of which Rachel formed the centre: men with coarse, flushed faces, and voices which clearly betokened an advanced stage of intoxication. A convincing proof of their condition—if proof were needed—was given by the fact that not one of them had noticed Simon's entrance. Sitting close beside the girl, with his arm resting on the back of her chair, was the Prince of Wales, not a whit more sober than his companions. It was thus Simon found her, his star, his queen, of whom not twenty-four hours before he had said that she would ever be to him the first of women. Now she was speaking, her voice sounding sharp and distinct even in the midst of the medley of coarse jests and laughter.

"No, I will not give up! I want to win—I must win."

"Nay, lovely Rachel, you will not win to-night," returned the Prince, leering at her with his blood-shot eyes. "You have won too much already. To-night it is your turn to lose—to pay. The time of reckoning comes at last; you must pay up, my charming madam."

"By Heavens, sir!" broke in another, "you are not the only one to whom this lady is in debt. I have here a number of her I.O.U.s."

"Nay, you will not deny my precedence, I trust," retorted the royal host. "I.O.U.s, forsooth! I have lost my heart, gentlemen; I must be paid for that."

He leaned forward, making as if he would take her hand; and she, startled, drew back, half rising from her chair. In another moment her eyes met those of her husband. With a half hysterical cry of joy and relief she sprang to her feet and ran towards him.

"Simon! oh, Simon! Thank God!"

Before she reached him, however, her outstretched

arms dropped by her side and her eyes fell; a deep flush overspread her face. Simon instinctively felt that in that moment she had become conscious of the degradation of her surroundings, and the sense of shame was not less bitter to him than to herself. But now a great hubbub and outcry arose. The noble if inebriated company was incensed and disturbed by the sudden and inexplicable appearance of this stranger in its midst. Who was he? How had he come there? What the devil did he want? The Prince, with his arm still resting on the back of the chair from which Rachel had risen, stared stupidly at him; Captain Montague remarked indistinctly that he fancied he had seen the fellow before.

Meanwhile Simon advanced to Rachel, and drew her arm through his. His expression was stern almost to severity, and he kept his eyes averted from her face. To see her thus stricken—humbled to the dust, was almost more than he could bear. After a brief pause he turned to the rest of the party.

"Gentlemen," he was beginning, when the Prince, roused from his seeming stupor by the yeoman's recent action, suddenly lurched on to his feet, and demanded fiercely what his business was; desiring him in the same breath, and with an oath, to let the lady go.

"Sir," returned Simon quietly, "the lady is my wife—I am here on her behalf. All who deem that they have claims upon her must reckon with me."

A dead pause of a full minute ensued; and then the Prince, whose already inflamed countenance had suddenly become suffused with a still deeper flush, swore angrily that it was a lie; Miss Charnock was unmarried, as everybody knew.

"Nay, sir, he speaks the truth," said Rachel, with her eyes upon the ground; she was trembling like a leaf,

and vainly strove to steady her voice. "We have been married now for eight months and more."

"Madam!" cried his Royal Highness, stammering with rage, "I seem to recognise this gentleman now that I look at him more closely. Pray, is it not the same who accosted you on the Steine this very day, and did not you yourself declare that you did not know him?"

"Ah, sir," she returned almost inaudibly; "I was wrong in saying so. I might have said more truthfully that I did not know myself."

A confused outcry arose again: some voices raised high in incredulity, some in condemnation. Two or three of the party gathered round Simon menacingly, but he stood towering above them, stern and determined.

"I repeat it, gentlemen—the lady is my wife, and I am here to answer for her. Come, let me defray her debts and take her home."

"Gad, sir!" cried some one, with a brutal laugh, "you may have to answer for rather more than you bargain for! By the Lord Harry, 'tis a monstrous queer story! I wish you joy of your good lady, sir; faith, she's a treasure which you do well to secure! He! he!"

"Hush! fie!" cried another. "Pray, let the gentleman enjoy his happiness in peace. Hang it, he's a devilish good fellow. I, for one, prefer a bank-note to any lady's favour. I have here a little pile of her I.O.U.s, sir, which, since you are so obliging, I will exchange for ready money."

He came forward a little unsteadily, and, with a most amiable and polite bow, presented Simon with some scraps of paper on which Rachel had scrawled her name. His example was followed by others, the general indignation, even the general astonishment, overpowered by greed. Rachel hung her head yet lower, and turned so white and faint that but for Simon's protecting arm she

must have fallen. He instinctively felt how acute was her humiliation in being forced to suffer him to pay the penalty of her follies; gladly would he have spared her the shame and anguish, but it was necessary to have done once for all with these birds of prey. The contents of his well-filled pocket-book did not however suffice to defray Rachel's liabilities, and presently Simon was forced to request the gentlemen who remained unsatisfied to furnish him with their names and addresses, announcing emphatically that before the week was out all should be paid.

"But I must go home first," he added.

Thereupon the Prince, who had been a silent spectator of the scene, and indeed a motionless one, save for the occasional swaying of his great unwieldy body, now burst forth in ungovernable fury, vowing that he'd be d——d if Simon should depart like that. What did he mean, he cried, choking with rage, by forcing his way into his presence, and there behaving with such outrageous insolence? Did he think, forsooth, to escape unpunished? Where were the servants?--they should pay for admitting such a ruffian. Who had shown him up? Where were the villains?—Let somebody call them—let somebody ring the bell. Why did not somebody ring the bell? Was he to be defied and insulted without any one so much as lifting a finger in his defence? Ha! but they should all rue it—they should repent it to the last moment of their lives.

Captain Montague, who was perhaps the most sober of the party, made his way to the door at the farther end of the room—not that by which Simon had entered. He turned the handle hastily, but the lock did not yield. He paused, looked more closely, uttered a short laugh, and finally made his way back to the spot where the Heir Apparent was still raving.

"The fellow cannot have entered in that way, your Royal Highness," he said; "the door is locked, and the key is in your Royal Highness' pocket. You will remember, sir, having playfully locked and taken possession of it when Miss Charnock—I beg the lady's pardon—Mrs. Whatever-her-name-may-be, was for leaving us some time ago."

The Prince looked suddenly disconcerted. Drawing the key from his pocket he handed it to the gallant captain, and desired him haughtily to unfasten the door at once; then, turning to Simon, he said in an altered tone:—

"Then pray, sir, how did you get in?"

"I came in," said Simon, "by that door," pointing to the one through which he had passed. "I made my way hither by what I take to be a private passage. Your servants are not to blame, sir."

The Prince did not speak for a moment; his anger had apparently left him, but not his discomposure, which indeed seemed rather to increase.

The wrath of his obsequious adherents waxed loud. The affair must be looked into, announced one. 'Twas house-breaking, no less—the fellow must be secured. 'Twas a plot, a devilish plot—his Royal Highness' life might possibly be in danger.

"No, no," cried their master peevishly. "I know well enough who is at the bottom of this; I understand how you came hither, young man. And now, since you have done your business, have the kindness to relieve me of your presence. Ring the bell there—how often must I speak?"

There had been meanwhile much hurrying to and fro without, and several servants had already entered the room, though his Royal Highness was unconscious of the fact. One of them now respectfully announced his presence.

"Oh, you are there, eh?" said the Prince irritably. "Take this person downstairs. Let him go, I say," he added, raising his voice, as his too officious friends were about to make some protest, "I will have no scenes here—let him depart at once."

"And the lady, sir?" put in an obsequious voice; "shall the lady go too?"

He rolled his heavy eyes towards her:—

"She may go," he said in a dull voice, "if she goes willingly."

"Oh, sir, I go willingly, indeed," faltered Rachel. "God knows, I go willingly!" And her voice lost itself in a rush of tears.

Simon half carried her out of the room, and through the apartments that remained to be traversed, and down the great stairs. Her limbs failed beneath her, and her head swam; but by-and-bye she felt the fresh air of heaven blowing upon her face, and, looking up, found herself out in the quiet night, alone with Simon.

CHAPTER XXXV.

. . . Know yourself, down on your knees,
And thank heaven, fasting, for a good man's love.
. . . . . .
My lord and lady it is now our time
That have stood by and seen our wishes prosper
To cry good joy ; good joy my lord and lady.

—SHAKESPEARE.

RACHEL clung convulsively to her husband's arm, but her head was bent and she said no word ; they made a few paces together and then he suddenly paused. She did not raise her head nor speak, and after a moment he said in a voice which from sheer emotion sounded stern :—

"Where shall I take you? Where would you like to go?"

"I am in your hands," she replied in a muffled, spiritless tone ; "you must dispose of me as you think fit."

She felt the arm on which she leaned quiver suddenly, and he drew a long breath ; then he said, gravely and quietly :—

"Have no fear, my dear ; far be it from me to take advantage of you now. But you will, I am sure, agree with me, that it is best for you to leave this place. Come, you will let me take you to your mother—let me take you home—home is best."

"Yes," said Rachel with a little sob, "home is best."

"Well then," said Simon with assumed cheerfulness, "you will allow me to find a lodging for you where you

may rest till daybreak? You need repose, and we could hardly start before then."

"Oh, let us start now," cried Rachel, almost with a groan. "Pray, let it be now. Every moment that I remain here is agony. I beg of you, take me away at once."

"So be it," said Simon still cheerfully, though the cheerfulness had a very hollow ring. "The inn where I am staying is not far from here, and I know they keep post-horses. I will conduct you there, and make preparations for our departure at once. But you—can you travel as you are now—in that thin dress, and without even a shawl?"

"Have I no shawl?" said she, as though perceiving the fact for the first time; "it does not matter, I am not cold. We are losing time—oh, make haste, make haste, Simon! I shall not breathe until I have left this place."

They hurried on, and soon came to the little hostelry where Simon had been lodging; all the house was in darkness, and as he was about to knock at the door Rachel shrank back.

"Do not let them see me," she said. "I—I am ashamed."

Her husband drew her arm more firmly through his:—

"No need to be ashamed," he said. "Have no fear—no one shall molest you."

In another moment his thundering rap roused all the echoes of the quiet place, and even the sleepy "Boots". The door was unbolted and opened a very little way, and a tremulous "Who's there?" was muttered through the chink.

"'Tis I—Mr. Fleetwood; I have been staying here, but I and my wife must leave Brighton to-night. Let us in until the chaise is ready."

Slip-shod feet were now heard descending the stairs, and an anxious query in feminine tones.

"'Tis the first floor back, ma'am," responded Boots, looking over his shoulder, and still holding the door ajar. "He's got his lady here, and says they must leave Brighton to-night."

"Goodness gracious!" came the exclamation in shrill anger and surprise. "Well, open the door there, James, and let 'em in."

But when the good landlady, who, mindful of her somewhat scanty attire, had not ventured to come farther than the landing, where she was endeavouring to keep her ample person as much out of sight as was compatible with her desire to inspect the new comers, caught sight of Rachel's bare head and flimsy white evening dress, she sniffed audibly. "Wife, indeed!" she ejaculated; "I don't believe no such cock-an'-bull story. The gentleman hadn't no wife when he come here. Take your lady away, sir; I'll not have her in the house."

"Ma'am," said Simon, "my wish is to leave your house at once, as soon as I can pack my bag and pay your bill. Meanwhile, I insist on Mrs. Fleetwood being shown to some apartment where she can wait until the post-chaise is ready."

"Never heard of such a thing," grumbled the dame; "a pretty time o' night to be gettin' apartments ready. You'll have to pay double for the post-chaise, sir, I can tell you. Aye, 'twould serve you right if I charged you double for everything. Dragging decent folks out o' their beds, and frightening them out o' their senses! If trouble comes o' this, this here establishment is not to be held responsible—nay, an' I'll not promise to hold my tongue if folks come after you."

"You may charge us what you like," broke in Simon impatiently, "and say whatever you please. No one

will come after us—we need but to stay a quarter of an hour."

"I can sit here," said Rachel, speaking for the first time. "I can be in no one's way here." And withdrawing her arm from Simon's she sank down upon a settle which stood in the narrow hall.

Grumbling, but somewhat mollified, the landlady retired to make up her bill, taking out the value of her irritation in charges as exorbitant as she could make them; and setting his flickering candle upon a bracket James led the way to the stable followed by Simon.

Many curious glances were directed towards the strange lady as she sat on the wooden bench, shivering, though she had said she was not cold. First a sleepy waiter peered at her from the back premises; then the round eyes of a chamber-maid fixed themselves upon her; finally the tasselled night-cap of the landlord himself came bobbing cautiously over the balusters, but was withdrawn with a jerk on the reappearance of his better half, whose voice was raised high in vituperation as with clumsy slippered tread he regained his own quarters. But Rachel neither moved nor spoke until Simon returned, when she raised her head quickly.

"Is it ready? Can we go?"

"The chaise will be round in a moment," replied he. "Meanwhile, I will pay the bill and fetch my things."

He passed her and mounted the stairs, three steps at a time; his advent causing a great commotion in the upper regions. Bare feet paddled hastily away, towsled heads vanished round corners, doors were banged. On his return the hostess, with a shawl over her night-cap and a petticoat held in place by one sturdy hand, stood waiting for him on the landing, the bill in her disengaged finger and thumb. Simon glanced at it, threw one of the bank-notes which he had held in reserve towards her,

and hurried on. The sound of wheels was now heard without, and Rachel had risen to her feet.

"Let me wrap you in this coat," he said briefly, when he stood beside her; "the night is chilly."

He held up his own great-coat, a heavy one with capes, so long that when Rachel wore it it trailed upon the ground. As she thrust her arms into the sleeves the cuffs fell over her fingers, and, holding them up, she looked in her husband's face with a momentary wan little smile; but he had already turned from her and hastened towards the door. As he flung it open he did not see her brush that monstrous cuff across her eyes, yet when they were at length seated side by side in the vehicle he knew that she was weeping. Aye, there they sat, side by side, bound to each other by the closest of all human ties, and he knew her to be in sorrow, and he durst not take her to his heart.

"I am in your hands; dispose of me as you will." Oh, cruel words! He thought to have won her at last, and it seemed to him that they had never been so far apart. Her very submission was a dagger in his heart. This crushed, humiliated Rachel belonged to him indeed, was pitifully conscious of his power over her—would he not be worse than dastard if he forced himself upon her now? She shrank from him into the farthest corner; it seemed to him that she was afraid of him—oh, she need not fear!

"Rachel," he said aloud, and though from her dark corner she strained her ears to listen, she could detect no tenderness in his voice. "Rachel, do not weep so bitterly—it is all over now; you must forget it. No one shall harm you; no one shall press their claims upon you—do not be afraid—not even I."

Once, twice, she tried to speak, and then the words came with a sob:—

"Simon, do you mean what you say—do you mean it? After all you have done for me to-night can you indeed forget your claims?"

He started as if stung: she alluded, no doubt, to those debts of hers which he had defrayed. Once before, in bitterness of spirit, she had taunted him with having bought her; and now, in this new-found meekness, told herself that he was entitled to the bargain for which he had paid such a heavy price.

There was a long silence, and then he spoke with an effort.

"Let us understand each other. You are my wife, indeed, and after to-night I think that I must ask you to bear my name, and own our marriage; but since you do not love me, Rachel, it may be best for us to live apart. Nay, do not sob so, my dear; we must make the best of our broken lives, and, after all, you are going back to your mother. There, lie back and try to rest."

"But I—but Simon—oh, I see how wicked you think me. Indeed, indeed, I am not so wicked as you suppose. Oh, Simon, I have been reckless and perverse, but I—I swear to you ——"

"Hush, hush," said Simon quickly; "you need say nothing more. I never doubted you, Rachel."

His tone was so stern, so final, that she was instantly silenced, and retreated farther than ever into her corner, while he sat upright, gazing out into the night. By-and-bye the grey shadowy light, which she had seen before on one memorable morning, crept gradually over the world, giving shape and distinctness to the landscape through which they whirled. The dusky silhouette of Simon's face stood out in relief against the pane, growing ever more distinct, until at last its very expression was clear to the wife's eyes. How rigid and fixed were those features, how firmly set the lips; the brows, slightly

drawn together, gave an expression of severity to the eyes beneath; and then—how worn was the face, how weary!

When that other sun had dawned so many months ago, how passionately tender had been the smile he turned upon her. Had she dreamt it all—all the horror and the tragedy—was she dreaming now? could she but shake off this terrible oppression and wake to find Simon smiling at her, and to know that this was her wedding morning! Oh, no, no, it was too real: the happy past had been a dream, and she was waking now. That which was done could never be undone.

They reached London at six o'clock, and there, though much against her will, Simon insisted on Rachel's resting for some hours. She did not sleep, however, but lay wide-eyed and miserable, gazing at the whitewashed ceiling of her chamber, and hailing with inexpressible relief the summons to continue their journey. Simon was waiting for her in the hall below, his eyes as hollow as her own, his face as haggard; he, too, had watched. They resumed their places in unbroken silence, and so journeyed on again, halting sometimes to change horses and to partake of some refreshment, but delaying as little as they could.

Twilight came, and then night; and at length Rachel, worn out by fatigue and emotion, fell asleep in her corner. She was still asleep when they changed horses for the last time. Her exhaustion was so great, and her slumber, like that of all "who sleep for sorrow," so profound, that she was unconscious even of the noise and movement consequent on this proceeding, and to her husband's relief the renewed motion of the chaise did not rouse her. To his relief, I say, for a certain resolve had gradually shaped itself in his mind. He would relieve her of his presence even while she slept,

sparing her thus further perplexities, it might be, further humiliations. The pain of her home-coming should not be increased by the consciousness of his presence; she should make the needful explanations to her parents in private, and thus avoid the confusion of acknowledging their relations to each other while he actually stood by. Yes, he would go; and she on awaking and finding herself alone would breathe more freely, and be grateful for his forbearance.

Now one familiar landmark flashed in sight, and now another: the time had come. How soundly she slept! Her little face was pale, but looked very peaceful; the lips had dropped apart almost in a smile, the dark-rimmed eyes were fast sealed—there were tears upon the lashes yet. Poor child! poor child! The small hands which had before clutched the folds of the heavy coat so convulsively were relaxed, and lay softly curled like the hands of an infant. Simon bent over them and kissed them very lightly; then filled with an uncontrollable impulse he suffered his lips to rest for one moment on the lips which were so gently smiling. The dark eyes opened, and gazed drowsily at him, and his heart leaped; but they were full of slumber still, and closed again without recognition. "It was for the last time," he said to himself. "Good-bye, my sweet!"

They were ascending a hill now at a somewhat slackened pace, and he opened the door softly, and, after closing it, dropped behind; doing all so cautiously that the postboy himself knew nothing of what had happened.

. . . . . .

The sun was high in the heavens when Simon drew near to his home. He came at a swinging pace across the dewy fields, leaping ditches, forcing his way through the cool dripping branches of the hedgerows, while the

larks carolled above, and the waking nestlings querulously chirped. Simon, with his heavy heart, felt himself at variance with this joyous world of spring; and pressed on, eager to be out of sight and hearing of all those glad and innocent waking things, eager above all to escape from the maddening thoughts which pursued him. She has no love for me—her love is dead. All, all is at an end!

He had not known with how much hope he had set out on his anxious quest, until now, on his return, he realised that hope had fled. Who shall describe the sinking of the heart with which his eyes fell on the old house where he had lived and dreamed for so many years! He would never dream again. But he must live there, live out his lonely life in desolation of spirit.

The windows of the oak room were all aglow with the radiance of the newly-risen sun. What was this? one of them was open. Was Susan already astir? With a groan Simon pictured to himself her surprise and joy at his return. And he must smile and make a show of pleasure, and drop no hint of his misery and shame.

But lo! as he drew nearer he saw a figure pass before the windows; a figure too slight to be taken for Susan's—not Dolly's for it was too tall; besides, it was clad in white. With a muffled cry he hastened forward, and as he approached the open window the figure in the room turned, and with a faltering step drew near it too. And thus it came to pass that they stood and looked at one another as they had looked on that far away night when she had first taken possession of his life; but oh, how different was the face which now bent towards him, what meaning had the eyes that gazed into his own! The arch gaiety of the child-maiden was gone, but in its place he read something which Rachel's eyes had never held for him before: the deep tenderness, the passionate pleading of the woman—of the wife.

Now her voice came to him—not louder than a whisper, but he heard.

"Simon, you said I might come home—is not this my home? Oh, Simon, my husband, let me stay!"

These mullioned windows are awkward things, else Simon had been in the room that instant; his shoulders were broad, too—inconveniently broad; but for all that he contrived to throw one arm about the yielding figure, and to draw the exquisite face close, close, until it rested against his.

"Simon," she murmured, "though I was so wicked I loved you all the time—I loved you. Oh! when I saw you standing yonder amid that crew—I knew then, Simon, I knew then—and I thought my heart would break!"

Not a word said he; but even as he clasped her the last cloud lifted, the last shadow of misunderstanding dropped from them, and each knew and understood.

How long they stood thus in the sweet spring sunshine, with the cool air lifting their mingled locks, it would be difficult to say; but all at once Simon gave a low laugh of supreme content.

"I must go in—I must have both my arms about you, sweet."

And in another moment he stood beside her, as he had so often dreamed, upon the hearth; and both his arms were clasping her, and she was telling him brokenly how she had longed to fling herself into them all through that sorrowful journey, but that her heart had failed her. She had meant from the first to seek his home, she said, to throw herself upon his mercy, to beg for his forgiveness and some measure of his love; but she would scarce have ventured that morning had she not had a dream that gave her courage. . . .

All at once the door was cautiously opened, and old

Susan's head was thrust into the room. At sight of the couple by the hearth she uttered a scream of rapture, and rushed towards them, clapping her hands.

"It's him!" she cried, "it's the Master! Heaven be praised for this blessed day!"

"Did I not tell you," said Rachel, with something of her old gaiety, "that the Master would come soon!"

"That you did, miss, dear. I couldn't think who 'twas knockin' so early you know. Eh, Simon, ye met ha' knocked me down wi' a feather when I opened door yon, and saw Miss Charnock standin' wi' her bare head, an' th' coat draggin' on th' ground, and her bonny dress all draggled, and her white face lookin'—— Dear o' me, it give me a turn. I skriked out, and miss, she stepped past me, and says she, 'Dunnot be afeared, Susan; it's nobbut me. Master'll be here presently,' says she. 'Well,' says I to Dolly, 'if it hadn't ha' been as this here's our gaffer's coat, an' ghostes, so far as I've heerd on, never wears other folk's clooes, I'd ha' said 'twas a spirit.' But I fotched her in, and made up a bit o' fire. But, eh! I'm all of a shake still."

"All's well that ends well, isn't it, Susan?" cried Simon, taking her by both hands. "But you mustn't call this lady Miss Charnock any more. This lady is Mrs. Fleetwood. Wish me joy, old woman; wish me joy!" And of a sudden he caught her round the neck, as he had been wont to do in his boyish days. Susan's first impulse was to imprint a hearty salute on her master's bronzed cheek, but in the next moment she pushed him from her.

"Nay, lad; dunnot go for to tell me sich tales. For shame of ye—makkin' a fool o' th' owd woman. Wed indeed—you as was breakin' your heart a two-three days ago about the ill news yo'd had. I'll not believe it—why, wheer's the ring?"

Silence greeted her words; and wagging her head

triumphantly, the old woman left the room, pausing at the door to announce that it was enough for her to know as they'd made it up, and were feelin' comfortable together.

"Simon," said Rachel, when they were alone, "you must give me back my ring—never, never to be parted with again. No, no—" as, drawing it, from his finger, he would have put it on her own, "not like that—I must be on my knees. Let us kneel down here by our hearth, and let us plight our troth again."

The vows which bound them to each other had been made in impetuous passion, with wilfulness of heart; swift retribution had followed these unhallowed rites. "I knew there could not be a blessing," Simon had said, and he had bent his head beneath the chastising hand. But now, as husband and wife knelt side by side before the altar of their home, and said the solemn words, with what love and fervour, what humble trusting faith, was there no blessing? Did not He who reads all hearts look lovingly upon the trembling hope of theirs, and seal and sanctify this renewal of their pledge?

As they rose to their feet Susan hurried in again:—

"Miss, dear, I made bold to send word to Madam as you was here. Eh, she's been in sich a way, yo' cannot think. I reckon she must ha' knowed our mester had gone to look for yo', for she bid me let her know the instant minute he come home; so when ye towd me, miss, as he was follerin' yo'—though why yo' shouldn't ha' walked one along o' t'other I can't think and 'tisn't none o' my business to inquire—I did send word yon. I ax yer pardon if 'twas takkin' a liberty, but I couldn't but keep my word to Madam."

"You did quite right," said Rachel colouring. "I am very glad—Darling mother!"

Almost as she spoke a hurried sound of steps was heard, and Madam Charnock rushed into the room. Rachel was in her arms in a moment, and she held her close in a long embrace. Then, drawing back, she looked eagerly from one to the other of the radiant faces.

"All is well, I see," she said. "My Rachel, you are in safe keeping at last."

Then turning to Simon, and raising herself on tip-toe, she laid a hand on each of his broad shoulders, and lifted her face to his :—

"My son!" she said.

THE END.

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